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Morning

The heart in which I live
furnace and rose, bursts
as I see you drive by head
showing above the glass
of your windshield the
red plate of your license
glow in my gut and I turn
over, step up on the bus
throw my smoking money
in the slot, sit at the
window and stare out through
ancient filthy glass until
my eyes ache. The driver
smiles at everybody one by
one, says, good morning. Wrapped
in juices of my dread I smile
back, move back into the womb of
morning bus. Goodbye is what I say.
Aerial View

The island spreads itself out
like a veined hand lying with outstretched
fingers. The X marked on the map, the
house, the bay called POVERTY BEACH

Clotted green, a mud color around the edge,
the beach shimmers a little in memory
we are accustomed to think too much of the
light. I was caught

in the ocean, sweating
under the X, the rooms I lived in,
a house that is not mine. Everything turns
to the side of light, the mind's

light

rainlight  primal source  radiance. The

light gave off its own wanting, a
sort of love. Turning over the stones
I sat caressing a conch shell, half
asleep in the sun of late
afternoon. Fog at night.
Fire

You lie on your bed
your bed is on fire
you sit on the chair
the chair is on fire
and the sky, too
the sky is on fire
your pillows aflame
your whole body, that, too,
burning, and your hands, your
eyes, your memory of Billie
Holiday singing ALL OF ME,
all of you flaming, your
bed, fire, and everything red,
orange, at last, you’ve become
orange as you’ve always wanted
but you had to burn first.
Ars Poetica

I break each day over my knee,
old kindling, feeding my fire.
Its heat shatters stone.
I hold my hands high
over my head. They ignite,
each finger a wick
burning. Hair flares.
I run from oak to elm,
touch walnut and poplar.
Each crown bursts,
a gargantuan torch,
flashfires the canopy.
When you see the mountain
glow red wild with its own dawn,
you will know I come,
the fiery apparition
on the edge of yourself.
Smoke is my sign,
fire my life.
You will burn if I touch you.
You will burn.
Proxy
for Suzanne

This key is his permission.
Your sudden absence binds him
in a curious imperative. Still
he will be uncertain.

You can see him take off his shoes
and move silently through the house.
He will feel the towels.
They will be damp. That should
make it easier. He will shower
and then be ready.

Perhaps he will wash out his shirt
and unfurl it as you would do
under the eaves of the shed.
He will drink the brand of beer
he finds in your refrigerator.

As time passes you know he will begin
to sit where you sit. Take up this book
from the side table, open to your marker,
begin to read.

Again and again through the afternoons
he will light his pipe with your matches
until the bowl on the bathroom shelf
is empty. You suspect
he will see everything clear
and without shadow: the table, the chairs.

When he goes into the garden, he
will let the screen door slam comfortably.
And if he finds his shirt blown down
by the path, he will not be surprised.
Maybe it has lain there a long time.
Maybe it is not even his.
He will think of cutting the rose
that hangs its head beside the fence.
He will imagine he is healing.

At dusk, when the only voice
is the peal of the woman who cooks
for the old one next door,
he will go in to face this cupboard.
He will know the idiosyncrasies
of this stove. And these plants.
He will water these plants.

Mornings, when his face
is framed like the visage of an old
acquaintance in the bathroom mirror,
he will ignore it, preferring solitude.

He will begin to forge your voice
to friends on the phone.
And when the doorbell sounds,
he will even know to turn away gently
the crazy young man
who comes looking for rooms.

No doubt the nights will be
most difficult to assume.
He will take the loose coins
from his pocket, and put them here
beside the basket of soft underwear
on the bureau. He will turn on this fan
to find the right pitch for his dreams.

He will lie down where you would lie.
On the steep roof next door,
the new moon will pause, familiar
a moment as a breast in the lamplight.

And falling toward sleep
he will feel himself reaching
like someone expecting good news
at last. Like someone fallen
into a borrowed happiness.
Matters of the Heart

They are shooting lovers.
DuMotier awakes in Pipersville.
He has been dreaming of LaFitte again.
The cries of soldiers flutter
at his window. Rising, dishabille,
he hears a ragged volley.

Now the loved ones will come grieving
to the roof-slates of the inn.
He regrets the heavy wingbeats.
Pulls on his trousers.
He feels accused, despite his wound.

This is bitter, an ill-tempered war.
He can almost hear their hearts' crack
as the geese turn
toward the guns again, married now
to ghosts and bloody uniforms.
His troops and Washington's are dwindling.
Still, there is an aftertaste, good wine,
perhaps of celery, in his delicate mouth.
1. The Iron Helm

When the fratricidal war gathered gloom and excitement was taking possession of the harvest, the Massachusetts Eighth thought calmly upon the subject. That settled the hash. The sympathies of the civilized world could not brook vulgar familiarity while the "slave digarchs" deepened. Between drills, the people were unanimous. The South was indeed insane. Intelligence, patriotism, Christianity had at last to be hauled down and, as the die was hateful, it stained the pages of prejudice. It was popularly believed that the Constitution had dark prospects before it, but was the best of entertainment. Mr. Lincoln would save the Union in a blanket. There was, after Fort Sumter, such soldier-spirit that guns gleamed registered in heaven.

2. The Confederacy From Within

An agricultural morning. The enemy's export of cheerful content that can be driven or rolled accompanies the artillery fire. Yet our courage does not come within easy range. I therefore resign my commission in the breastworks and, save in a position of great natural anxiety, I hope I may never be set afire and pushed to float down the tide.

As a necessity, not a black guilty thing, we have resorted to the highest pitch. The night remains. Our victory is said to be Chinese, but not of mutual interest. Others will follow on horseback.

Perhaps the blockader is ready to seize any odd spectators because, from the firing of the first blessing till the superiority of numbers, the Confederate soldier is a great institution on foot. I know you will blame me, but the Division is marching deeply into black faces and shining teeth. The dead and wounded are arranged with licenced levity.

Suddenly, before the strength of our line could sicken the Yankees, a bulletin from the assistant surgeon approached the north bank of the river. Every field gun and howitzer belched forth the bowels of the earth.
3. The Closing-in of the Blue

There fell a great silence. Behind it lay a regiment of Confederates who appealed for better ventilation. Mr. Lincoln never slept while Atlanta became a song sung for three long years. Favoring by the night and mist from an early period in the rebellion the energy of despair made for a thing of the past. Floods of tears might have been better in conception.

Not a single soldier was left, but the air had enough to make a show in uniform. “My God, is it to end in this way,” he exclaimed clasping the clear sunlight with no purpose. I plunged into the gloom necessary to a speedy termination of the war.

Thousands upon thousands of blacks determined to use numbers. Owing to the difference in age, the doomed city, like so many hissing serpents, shaved the ground. There was no heating the middle, no competent nurses, surgeon and attendants. Mr. Lincoln was dressed with deep latent sadness and the alternative of Pensacola.

The day dragged its hatred to submission with unwelcome progress. Harsh, heartless, inexorable, the Shenandoah enabled the enemy to pierce the air in a frightful manner. There was something else. A mass of granite to hammer continuously against. The next day he was cursing a dead man. Sick in body, sick at heart, lame, footsore, and bonfires made of railroad ties. The air was darkened by black smoke and cinders as the clanking of human nature was mounting to heaven.
XIX
Shorter American Memory
of Lincoln’s Death

The President the giant sufferer had been carried lay extended diagonally across the street from the theater across the bed to the house which was not long enough of a Mr. Peterson for him.

We entered he had been stripped by ascending a flight of his clothes passing through a long hall his large arms to the rear where the President occasionally exposed lay on a bed.

Breathing of a size heavily which several surgeons would scarce have expected were present at least six from his spare appearance I should think more.

His slow among them full respiration I was glad lifted to observe Dr. Hall the clothes who however with each breath soon left that he took.

I inquired his features of Dr. Hall were calm as I entered and striking.

The true condition I had of the President never seen the he replied appear the President to be better advantage was dead than for the first to all intents perhaps although he might live that I was there three hours or perhaps longer.

A door the night which opened was dark upon a porch cloudy or gallery damp and also the windows and about six were kept open it began to rain for fresh air.
Rio Bravo

John Wayne: Go ahead, say it!
Walter Brennan: You wuz wrong, Mr. Dunson.

About the color of the river.
About its shape and name.
Wrong about the odor of cattle
coming off the river.
Wrong for being so
blue-nose sure of yourself
myself in on under
the river. And about the kinds
of fish in that river. The
parasites in on after
the fish. The
wolf
that wants them all.

As for the drive
I'll set my mark on it
shaped like the river.
A man's mark,
bloated burro
a rattlesnake hit.
Under my sign my cattle
our your cattle
will wind and flow to
Abilene Saint Loo Wichita.
All those cattilefish
floating off bleaching
beside the rapids.
Those dreary ships our buckboards
lunging up the waterfalls.
To spawn in Abilene.
My sign a lunatic bull
bobbing like an apple
in a tin tub
in Wichita.
And now you tell me
at this particular bend
I was wrong.
Tennessee Williams is dead

The delicatessen on 19th St. was filled
at quarter after noon
with old men who roll their cigars on their tongues
and widows with hair the color of spent flashcubes
chatting in immaculate, purse-piled knots;
and there was a very tall black man named Jimmy
and a trio of mustachioed queens
which included an elegant hustler
in a turquoise shirt with lifted collar.
Someone at our table was saying
Tennessee Williams is dead,
and then later
there was a beautiful mulatto boy
asleep on the streetcar
and a woman selling flowers that nobody wanted
and when night came,
like a curtain falling on the play
that's utterly exhausted its only audience,
there was a moon as ripe and unreachable
as the thigh of someone physically perfect;
and then after that
a man and a woman who circled each other with voices
so strident they slammed down on the sidewalk
from a fourth floor apartment
so that even the liveried doorman's plaster smile cracked,
like the face of someone who realizes he's choking,
and every person's voice that day
was a history of remembered insults
or shameful interludes
mixed with the moments
he lived for.
TheLoNioUs MOnk to been had

imagine the lovers and cats got bop'd
the sweat'd ivory was blessed—
the impressed felt
striking his strings
chiming the chords beyond sound's sea—
imagine the instep of his musical pedal power—
the fell'd timber turn'd varnished planks to encase
his jack giant mastery—
imagine his whole and quarter rests—
his eighth and fifty-fifth notes—
imagine the man
carting rhythms
in the bass
of his most treble
imagination's clef.
I want it proved
I french kissed chopin never, not
when there was so much evidence! evidence! evidence!
a pact with ginsberg

beyond personal lengths and stars
there are words out there
to make even gi-
ants crumple
if we could just
imagine them
and sentences
shook'd loose
from hyperbole stalks
or gods beating fire
w/ bird kinds and bells/
chimes/ man we cd say the earth/
the river's lazy splash/
write the poem charg'd
with the alness of ra/
if we wuz free
we cd say
any damn thing
we please
wham/scit/boom
no sweat.
Petra

The medium stopped my boyfriend at the door.

"She wants to see you alone," she said.

She? For the three days I'd been trudging to Madame Rosa's fifth floor walk-up in Prospect Park, we'd been conversing à trois with a bizarre character named Gustav. Not only was he not a she, but he went out of his disembodied way to make a point of it. Gustav loved strategy. He'd been a Hapsburg officer during the heyday of Franz Joseph, stationed in a dusty garrison in Hungary where he'd played cards and done cavalry drills, until one day—when he was called to stand guard for Archduke Ferdinand in Serbia. Leaving Sarajevo with the Duke, he remained his companion through at least three Stages. Their favorite thing for fifty years or so had been to play astral pinochle and discuss the many ways in which the Austrian Empire could have won the First World War. The Archduke was quite bitter about it, especially after he met Metternick and the great soldier had totally agreed with his ideas about the war. Gustav's job on Stage Two had been to catch the generals and strategists of that event when they entered the astral plane, and to bring them by the scruff of their souls, so to speak, before Ferdinand had joined Stage 4, and he was left with no one capable or interested in discussing strategy, which had compelled him to that ultimate of desperate ecstatics: making conversation with embodied creatures. The florid, flower- nightshirited, pom-pom slippered body of Madame Rosa hadn't been his first choice, but everywhere he went in the Circle of Mediums (which looks from the other side like a deep cauldron with little circles of lights in it) he found most of them taken by snarling entities in deep communication. So he plunged into the first available one like a man finding a vacant stall in an airport lavatory, and that was Madame Rosa.

I didn't exactly like Gustav. Most of the time he seemed to be speaking to Jack, anyway. Never mind the fact that it was I who paid the madame her twenty fat ones each time, and that it was I who had committed herself to foolishly writing a Sunday magazine newspaper feature on it. At times, I felt that I was watching two boys talk toy soldiers and once I did my fingernails and went to Madame Rosa's incredible bathroom—there were five shrines in there, each one with a votive candle and dead flowers under oily lithographs of muscular madonnas, and hundreds of bottles of variously colored liquid labeled "luck," "money," etc.; two black velvet Azteca paintings behind the shower; a velvet shower curtain; a shag rug of plastic black curls resembling not a sacrificed sheep but a murdered car seat; and glued on the toilet were hundreds of pictures cut from magazines, making the whole an indescribable collage and a most unsettling place for lowering one's behind, which then seemed to fit into a puzzle only God knows what it meant to spell; and on the back of the door hung large terrycloth towels with appliquéd images of the Vatican and of every Pope that would fit; the toilet paper was perfumed, lavender and had little crowns in filigree and when I came back, Gustav was still talking as if nothing had occurred.

So I was rather relieved when Madame Rosa said "she," and told Jack
to wait outside. I could barely imagine that Gustav had decided to change sex and have a tête-à-tête with me. Something else was going on.

“OK,” said Jack, “I’ve waited for women before.”

Madame Rosa wasn’t exactly her usual self. She seemed a little unsettled. With Gustav she had been perfectly comfortable. She sank at once on her enormous floating pillow embroidered with primitive theosophy, and started talking. It was a clear, young voice. I remembered it at once

“Petra,” I blurted

“Long time no see, Jockey!”

“I still don’t see you. But if you see me, that’s enough. How do I look?”

“Bored, tired, losing a chunk of your soul every time you sell another stupid article.”

It was Petra all right. I felt suddenly afraid. She was dead then.

“I didn’t know you were dead, P.”

There was a pause. Madame Rosa groaned and shifted hams.

“Well, I’m not. I’m just tripping. I’m part of an astral corporation I formed with Armany. It’s hard to explain.”

She didn’t have to. We’d both been a little in love with Armany in our school days, but she had become quite obsessed later on. She read occult meanings in his slightest gestures. We’d fallen out over him. But Petra! How well I remembered her, her sleepy voice. We’d met in grad school in Chicago. Armany taught the course in comparative religion. I’d begun collating the myths of the Aleuts with those of their Siberian brothers when my roommate suddenly quit. I couldn’t afford any distractions and this business of finding a new roommate was a distinct pain. I didn’t want a man, especially a handsome one. I meant to avoid chatterboxes. No smokers. No airheads. I hate rock ‘n roll. I think I rejected thirty people on the phone. Then Petra called.

“Petra,” I said, “If you’re not dead, why do you have to bump into me this way? Couldn’t you use the telephone?”

“I can’t use the phone,” she said in her sleepiest voice. “I can’t take buses. I can’t take trains. I don’t have a burro. I don’t know how to use a Telex.”

I didn’t understand. This astral corporation you and Dr. Armany formed, it isn’t something fiendish and debilitating, is it?”

Madame Rosa made a cackle sounding like the boinggg of a spring deeply buried in a couch. I remembered Armany well. He was bald and his eyes were bottomless, black, filled with India ink. I surprised him sleeping once in his office. He faced forward in his chair, with his eyes open. I passed my hand in front of his eyes, and he woke up. “I’m sorry,” he said, in that mixed and charming Balkan tobacco voice. “I have been sleeping in my clothes like the beach.” That image had an eerie effect on me, and when I met Petra and heard her voice, the first thing I thought was: “She sleeps in her clothes like the beach.” After she became involved with Armany, and she started spending little time in the apartment, her voice deepened and she started sounding sleepier and sleepier.

The day before she disappeared, she looked thin and helpless, as if she was waiting on a beach for a wave to come and undress her. Cosmic. Strange. Vague outlines. But very pretty, enticing, nymphic. Oval, dark, silky, sleepy. She’d scared me.

“Petra,” I asked, “Where did you go when you left the house on Jarvis?”

“To Thibet,” she said.

“With Armany?”

“Sort of. Listen, there is something I want to tell you. When I left, you were still struggling with your thesis. K knew that the only way you could finish it was if I helped you. So I gave you the idea for a second version.”

“What are you saying, you semi-dead
ectoerpe? That you did my work for me?” I recognised in this the tenor of some of our less subtle instants of life together.

“No, no,” hastened the Astral Petra. “Only the idea!”

I'd written two versions of my thesis. One strictly for school, in which proper methodology was used and common myth themes were described, classified and dismissed, and another, a poetic version, expressing my bleak disgust at the present situation of native peoples below the Arctic circles. This version, called From Russia With Love, was about the fragmentation of spirit caused by the bristling weaponry, nuclear heads and deadly toys that now separate brother tribes from another. Unable to scale the rotating radar dishes and blinking electronics of the Polar cap, the Eskimos and the Siberians gaze longingly at each other through quickly disappearing legends. I submitted the first to the Master's Committee, the second to a literary magazine. I got my M.A. and the poetic polemic was published. And I was much taken with myself for it. And stil am.

“Really,” Petra was saying calmly, as if we were still sitting on the sunny living room floor of our young womanhood, “I didn’t have anything substantial to do with it...I only saw your dilemma and cleared your mind for its own work.”

But I wouldn’t have it. Disembodied or no, this was the same Petra I once—in one of my moments of uncertain reason—fiercely desired one afternoon. Only to be reasonably turned down. Her disembodied voice seemed suddenly full of that body, and I filled with the memory like a sail with a spring breeze. I shut my eyes tightly and rocked a little back and forth. The stab of embarrassment came as expected. It came every time I thought about it.

“What’s wrong?” said Petra's sleepy, faraway voice.

I opened my eyes. “Then you can't see everything?” I said.

“I can see everything connected to a certain plane of thought. I have little insight into desire. That was part of the deal. But I see that you are tired, that you are falling into a routine. A real danger to spiritual life. You used to be so adventurous.”

I didn’t remember being particularly adventurous. I’d gone to school for too long. The most adventurous thing I remember was getting drunk in a Black jazz joint on the South Side of Chicago, the day Petra had gone. She’d gone, leaving this message on the refrigerator with magnetic letters: GO NE TO INDI A. I sat in that joint, having accepted the protection of a flashy dude with a gold tooth, scrambling that message in my mind, until I came up with ONE GOATIN ID. Satisfied for the moment, I let him take me home in his pink Cadillac, and didn’t answer the phone until graduation.

But she had a point. Routine was getting me. Jack, outside the door, was an engineer. The house was full of blueprints.

“If I go to Chicago tomorrow and ring Armanyil's Tibetan bronze bell, will you be there, Petra?”

“Armanyil?” she said. “He's been dead for years.”

“Then...you...why not you?” I shouted. Madame Rosa opened her eyes. Sweat streamed down her volumes of flesh, her library of flesh, her Encyclopedia Brittanica of flesh. She looked exhausted.

“Wot speerreet, Miz Jokey!” she groaned. “I should pay me feeftee for dis!”

I looked at the fire escape window painted Giotto blue. A teenager was smoking a pipe on it.

When I went out, Jack said: “I know why Gustav wanted to see you alone.”

“Why?” I said.

“He wanted to propose. You always listen so patiently to him.”
When You Leave

Let us follow one firefly through this night;
it flickers in courtship like the memory
of last night's dream. One sunrise, you will leave
but this morning, you show me the photo
taken yesterday, of two hyacinths in bloom.

You say, "those hyacinths take their name from the youth
Apollo killed; from his blood grew the first hyacinth.
Each spring, the same message grows in the sun:

He whom I loved, I have killed."

What we see in memory of a dream is blood passing
through the eye, a red flickering of blossom
and fire in the dark. In your photograph,
I see the lightest trace of a lover's hand, moving:

He whom I loved is gone from me.
When you leave I will keep you in those words.
Language of Geranium

A gardener will tell you
that flowers have a language
subtle and flattering; but behind
those bright colors, you sicken them.
They are jaded, waiting to die.

Patient meanwhile, they measure time.
See how hardy they appear, daily
witnesses to scudding clouds, same rotating sky.
See how all things ignore you, continue, endlessly.

These leaves are slick with death-approaching green,
the flowers stunted, red as bloodied fists.
They tell you in the blunt and courtly way
of fading beauty sneering at the plain:
Never. You will never see him again.
The T-Shirt with the New York City Subway Map

Part III: Ode to the French

What do the French know anyway
About New York? What do they know about "Take the 'A' Train"?
What do the French know of the Double L Canarsie Line painted red

Like a slender belt
Which girdles you where you are slenderest, a part of the anatomy
Elongated by Botticelli, an Italian? Or Broadway following the curve
Of your ribs in a graceful swoop down my island
Sinking swiftly and avoiding the navel, as Broadway itself
Once curved to avoid Fraunces' Tavern? That was long before
You were born; then there were
No trains to ride on, and no place to go.

But once we could go
Anywhere, says your T-shirt, bravely
Beneath the spanking sun of exile, and I am lost
And thinking about it now

Like my countrymen gazing undaunted
(And daunted!) at the sweet new land
—Great souls and tiny avatars—

How long ago it seems!
Feeling like some watcher of the skies
When a new planet swims into his ken
To fade at morning, floundering softly upward above the air

We could have gone anywhere
Secret and alive, invisible as jazz
To the well-heeled ears of your countrymen!
Now all music reminds me of you
And the Cloisters remind me of you, or truly you
Remind me of them
Or why should I think of them now? In this
I do not resemble your countrymen—that is

In my thoughts. What do they know of the Cloisters, stolen
Piece by piece (from France) where I did not go with you

But might have—like a soul at the bar of judgment
My thought bears witness to the parapets
In which we might have stood, like wind
High over the bridges shining in the river's tiny applause
Like the high-wire at the circus, and where I would feel
Precarious as the high-wire artist (with you). I would steal
Every stone all over again to be with you there
Or build it elsewhere and we could live in it.

Like Peire Vidal I would sing you these songs

Or I'd come incognito muffled up in my cloak
Of stormy emotions to France, and steal you
As you stole my heart, like darkness
Hidden and shining in darkness

Be careful poem you are about a map!
But the French know nothing of jewels

Seen at night in the lights of bridges
Crossing the river from the N train.
They are not on your map; is that why I am lost

Once more in you? The lights seem delicate and small
As if they would like you to wear them

Also the sounds of the river tossing out to sea want you to hear them

My city of music and light

And architecture, invisible
To millions of imaginations not lost and found
In you. Untroubled by thoughts of the Chrysler Building
For example; we spoke excitedly of going there
But never found time to go! It was not on your map

It was not depicted there I mean but I could find it
Like a secret treasure or
Tenney Nathanson

A secret, or a flower, opening
As the petals of the Chrysler Building would open
If the Chrysler Building were a flower

As you are a flower (I would say,
Crazed and poetic seeing your face)

Is it on forty-third street?

I have not actually been to the Chrysler Building
But could look for it for years

With you and on you and with you

Or for you!
If only I had the map—

I am the long-lost heir to the throne of France I am the ruined dauphin
Afloat in a sea of patois
Like mixed-up laundry
Through which I search for the single jewel which would prove my claim

And you are the jewel

But also you are the claim you are the land of France

The small green field in Auvergne where I slept
And woke as the moon hung floating through pine trees
I thought if I reached out my hand
I could touch the moon

Which was not yet you

You are the red tile roofs of Auvergne which shine in the sun!
You are the rain in which the roofs grow pensive

Lost in you!
O weep

For the dauphin is mad!

Thoughts float

Like ghosts above a map
“Wandering and unable to find peace”
A map of an actual city which one day
Vanished, like Atlantis,
So men could dream of it for years!

It is hard to make use of a map gazing into the sea!

From out of these waters rise
Dripping and bright
Like Venus we will found

A new country undreamt of by the French! Do the French dream
Of America or France
Reborn and rising from the waves
Of wild surmise? Of you who may see you

Daily misunderstanding

Your T-shirt? Soon someone will ask you to discard it!

Come back!
The French know nothing of my dreams!
Seeing you constantly
Do the French dream (constantly)
Of your beautiful body

And how it made me feel?

Bring back the map I can't find anything!
Bring back the map I can't get to work!
I wander about hardly knowing where I am I am
Lost I don't know
How to get there I don't know where to go!

And also as the map

Is the representation bring back the land itself
My birthplace the city I love, the night

We walked down Broadway I kissed you and I understood
The expression, “The Great White Way”—everything glittered and exploded
Like the opening nights of all history rolled up into one sweet ball

And we were both the land

The first time we saw those shores.
habit's rag

had to buy a hamburger to write this poem
had to stick my nicotine stained finger in
the ketchup bottle to remember you
had to wipe my mouth with a greasy napkin
while you shopped at saks fifth avenue
had to eat fish on fridays
had to eat fish on fridays
had to eat it on fridays
had to listen to you drone over walter cronkite
six-thirty evening news nite after nite
that's the way it always was
had to put on clean clothes every day and had
to throw away the best rags i ever had
had to wait on you to return from your girlfriend's
on thursdays
had to cheat on you in my dreams
had to cheat on my dreams
had to go to midnite mass with a tux on
had to tuck in my shirt and button it to the top
had to learn how to breathe all over again
had to eat raw vegetables at your uncle's house
had to remember your uncle was a priest
every hour hell's sabbath
had to remember you were not my mother when
i got drunk at your father's funeral
had to pretend all the other women were ugly
had to pretend you were not
had to give up the bop on saturday nite
had to watch classic movies so you could
hug and talk at me all the way thru them
had to throw away all my elvis presley records
and learn how to swoon
had to change my brand of cigarettes
had to take up a cheaper brand of whiskey
had to forget what a bitch you were
    uh-huh uh-huh uh-huh uh-huh
had to settle down and get a good job
quit hangin out with my brothers
had to listen to how the moon would make you
    crazy and bleed like a pig every month
had to conceive of thirty hours to a day so
    you could play make-up on the telephone
had to get three call waiting system
had to see a therapist for the first time
had to listen to those stories about the good
    old times over and over at those
cocktail parties you'd give
had to stock the refrigerator with diet soda and
    lite beer
had to go home with you every nite while you
    bitched about my driving and weaved your
    shrill up my back
had to have a good time with your friends from
    new jersey
had to have my friends approved at board meetings
had to cut my hair for your sister's graduation
had to clip my nails so i wouldn't scratch your
    clit as you fell asleep
had to set the clocks half-an-hour fast so
    i could take a piss in the morning
had to drink herbal tea that smelt like piss
had to go on diets
had to get off diets
had to watch you diet with scarsdale stillman
    soap operas and so and so
had to buy myself time on a liquid diet
    yeh
had to buy a hamburger to write this poem
had to stick my nicotine stained finger in
    the ketchup bottle to remember you
Casting Off

Timmy (my son) is sulking in the bedroom, Matthew (the man I'm seeing now) has gone "for a walk," and I am sitting here in this motel room wondering whose idea it was to come to the beach anyway (mine). My name is Mary Burton.

Timmy was terrified of the waves. Matthew coaxed—shamed—him into the water, and for a while he seemed to be almost enjoying himself. Then he was hit from behind by a wave and came up coughing. He stumbled toward the beach, and Matthew tried to stop him. Up on the sand it was easy to hear Timmy wail, "Let me go. Leave me alone!" He ran to me sobbing, and Matthew followed him, fuming and embarrassed. Timmy is a very theatrical cryer.

"It's alright," I said to him.

"A wave hit him, that's all," said Matthew.

"I want to go home," Timmy whined. We all spoke more or less simultaneously.

"You're okay, Tim," Matthew said, bending down to pat him on the shoulder.

Timmy flinched and pressed himself closer to me. "I want to go home. I couldn't breathe."

Matthew had turned away and was looking toward the ocean, his back muscles—it's strange but I could actually see this—tightened in annoyance.

"We might as well head back," I said.

"It's getting late, anyway."

"It's two o'clock," Matthew said.

"Matt, please"

"Well, let's gather up the stuff then," he said.

We returned to the motel, and went our separate ways. It's been about an hour now and in a minute I'll go in to Timmy. Matthew will be back soon.

I met Matthew at a Parent and Teacher's meeting at Timmy's school. I had talked to two of his teachers—a young woman with yellow, curly hair dressed in a long Indian skirt and an embroidered tee shirt who said that Timmy was a very sensitive boy with a vivid imagination and an iron-faced older woman who described him as a crybaby and an incorrigible liar. Then I got into the wrong line.

"Hello, I'm Mary Burton, Timmy's mother," I said to the tall, mustached man who seemed uncomfortable in the suit he wore, and he looked down at me blankly.

"I'm in the wrong place, right?" I said.

"What grade is Timmy in?"

"Second."

"I teach in the sixth" he told me. "My name's Matthew Harris."

As we shook hands I was conscious of shuffling behind me, impatient muttering. "I'm sorry," I said. "Excuse me."

I felt he was watching me as I turned to go out. It was a freezing cold night in February with a few flakes of snow blowing around in the gusty wind, seeming to come from nowhere in the clear black sky. I had been waiting twenty minutes for the bus and about to give up on it when Matthew came out of the auditorium. It turned out that we lived not too far from each other, and so we walked together, and talked, or, in the manner of first conversation, interrogated each other, exchanged the bits and pieces of fact of our lives.

It felt natural, walking with him. As we got to my apartment we were trading stories about adolescence. Matthew told me about stealing a white ankle sock that belonged to a girl he'd worshipped in junior high school. I told him about
the month I'd worn nothing but black after a boy I was in love with asked me if I thought my best friend would go out with him. I invited him up to get warm before walking the rest of the way home.

I had left the lights on, but the apartment was dark except for the light from the television set. The volume was way up and ridiculously sinister organ tones boomed at us as we entered. Timmy was curled up asleep in a chair before the set. The absence of noise when I turned down the volume woke him.

"Mom, I just want to see the end," he pleaded immediately.

"The end of what?" I said. "You should have been in bed hours ago."

"Please? For just a second. It'll be over."


"Who's that?" Timmy said as I led him to his room. "Isn't that guy a teacher at school?"

When I came back after tucking Timmy in, Matthew was watching the movie, leaning toward the set to catch the dialogue. Dracula stared hungrily at the bare throat of a young woman artfully composed in sleep. "This is pretty good," he said a little sheepishly.

I asked him to stay, and made some coffee. Each more conscious of the other than of what was on the screen, we watched the movie and spoke in whispers during the commercials, guessing how much the truckload of cookware or the mountain of record albums offered for an unspecified "limited time only" sold for. I wondered what his mustache would feel like, kissing me.

The next day, almost before I had a chance to wonder if he would, Matthew called and asked me out to dinner. We went on in a more or less friendly way for a month or so, and then, after a party at some friends of his, we made love for the first time. We've been seeing each other pretty regularly since then.

When Matthew got back from his walk, he, Timmy and I went out to eat. Things seemed a bit better. Matthew asked Timmy how he felt and got a grudging "Okay" in return. We ate hamburgers at a place on the boardwalk, and then played a few games of miniature golf. The evening passed with an appearance of smoothness, but everything was an instant late, self-conscious. Timmy kept putting himself between me and Matthew, and talking about his father.

"I wish Daddy was here," he said to me as Matthew brought ice cream cones to us. He was just within earshot when Timmy spoke, passed out the cones, pretending he hadn't heard.

He left us when we returned to the motel—we had taken separate rooms—and I put Timmy to bed. As he changed into his pyjamas, I told him, "That wasn't a very nice thing to say, Timmy, that you wished Daddy were here."

"Why?"

"It just wasn't, that's all," I said. "How do you think Matthew felt?"

"I don't know," my sullen son responded. "Who cares?"

"I do, and so should you. He's been very nice to you."

"I'm sorry," he said, as if to get it out of the way. "Mom?"

"Yes?"

"Can I sleep with you tonight?"

"Why?" I asked.

"I don't feel good."

"What's wrong?"

"My belly hurts. I swallowed a bunch of water."

"That didn't stop you from eating dinner, or having dessert."

"It didn't hurt then."

"Well, just close your eyes and try to sleep," I said. "I'll be right outside."
In the other room I did the things you do when you're expecting someone at any moment—wandered around picking things up and putting them down again, turned the television set on and then off, held the newspaper in my hand without reading it. I looked in on Timmy, who had fallen asleep by now and then did nothing, sat waiting for Matthew. It's not easy for him sometimes. He said once, rather wistfully, that he wished he had known me when we were children, would have liked to be there first, not come in when so much has already happened, like someone stumbling into a dark theater in the middle of a play.

Donald, my ex-husband, was the teaching assistant for my introductory psychology class in college. I was a sophomore and, listening to Donald go over what the professor had said in each week's lecture, I was charmed by his awkwardness, his nervousness before the class. I found myself asking the easy, the obvious question, just to see his face brighten with relief. We were married a month after I graduated. Donald had finished his Ph.D. by then, and been offered an assistant professorship at a small college up in New England named after some obscure Colonial eccentric. Almost twelve months to the day after we'd moved into our white clapboard house, Timmy was born. And four years, seven months and eighteen days later, our divorce was final.

Shortly after that, Donald married the therapist he'd been seeing during the last year of our marriage. It was she, he said, who had given him the courage to face up to "our problem." She is older than he, and always reminded me of an aunt of mine who did nothing but clean the house when she came to visit us. The last I heard they were writing a book about themselves, a "psychohistory" of their relationship. I have a recurring fantasy of waking up one morning to see them being interviewed by Phil Donahue.

I suppose that what I am living now would be called a "new" life, one in which, casting off the old restraints, the old, false self, I find, after suitable tribulations, the true and shining self I was meant to be. It's the modern fairy tale. Unfortunately, it isn't something that I'm very good at. My closets (and my mind) are choked with the proof. I am crenched in the past, move surrounded by the ghosts of outdated reconciliations and cobwebby quarrels.

I opened the bedroom door again and watched Timmy sleep for a moment, hesitating, and then decided to go over to Matthew's. Our rooms overlooked the pool, and I saw him sitting in a lounge chair there by the water. "Matthew?"

He looked up, startled. "Hi," he said. "Come on down."

"I'm sorry about Timmy," I told him, sitting on the chair next to his. For a moment we were silent. "How come you're out here?" I asked.

"Fresh sea air. Beautiful view of the ocean." He shrugged. "I don't know I didn't know whether I should come over, if Timmy—I thought I'd give it a rest, that's all."

"You're angry," I said.

"No," he denied. "Well, yeah, I guess I am."

I waited, but he didn't say anything more. That annoyed me.

"Would you like to expand on that a little?" I said, with the oppressed feeling you get at the beginning of a conversation that can only go badly

"On what?"

"On what's upsetting you," I said. "We could talk about it."

"Forget it," he replied. "Listen, let's go somewhere and get a drink."

"Timmy's upstairs," I said

"I know," he said. "I don't think they'll
serve him."

"He's a little boy, Matthew," I told him. "You can't get like this about what he said. You're the first man I've really been with steadily, and the way he's acting is perfectly normal."

"I know it's perfectly normal," he said. "You think I never took any psychology courses?"

Then Donald was with us. I could see Matthew holding him up, pushing him at me accusingly.

"What's the matter then?" I said, ignoring the bait I'm not going to be the one to mention him, I thought stubbornly.

"This isn't going to change anything," he said, sounding deliberately weary. I hate it when he does that.

"I am not going to apologize to you for my life."

"I don't want you to."

"Yes you do."

We glowered at each other, and then a voice called, near tears, from above us. "Mommy?"

"Oh, shit," breathed Matthew. I could have strangled him. Conscious of his eyes on me, I answered Timmy. "Here I am, honey. I'll be right up." Then I walked off without looking at Matthew.

I put Timmy to bed, kissed him and sat on the edge of the mattress until he slept. He smiled and curled himself up beneath the covers. What was Matthew to this?

It suddenly all seemed so childish, idiotic really. I thought of all the men I had been with, of the boy who kissed me in the cloakroom in the fourth grade and the one who had threatened to commit suicide when he was impotent with me in college, of the silly formality of high school proms and the eternal silences of first dates. Donald, of how whatever had brought us together had disintegrated day by day until we were left alternately baffled and enraged at being in the same room, the same house. Then of Matthew, this time with regret, mourning over him a bit as if he were dead or in another country, not just down the hall. I pulled out the sofa bed, undressed and lay down, still thinking. I went around and around; finally exhausted myself and fell asleep.

In the morning I awoke startled at my loneliness. I had dreamt of Matthew, a cream that was a warm sensation, a gentle floating. I tried to hold onto it, fool myself back into sleep, but it didn't work. I felt awful, sticky and chilled at the same time. An open window let in damp morning air. Outside it was gray and foggy. There was a scummy taste in my mouth and my eyes burned.

I thought of Matthew snoring peacefully in his room, believing I would be angry, but instead found myself thinking of the disappointingly few times we had awakened together. Matthew is beautiful in sleep, his long body stretched out, lying on his back. He sleeps as if he is just taking a short rest. Donald slept on his stomach, his arms folded under him, like someone expecting attack.

I was drying myself, feeling better in a melancholy sort of way, when I heard a light knock on the door. Wrapped in a towel, I looked out at Matthew.

"Hi," he said. "I waited until I figured you would be awake."

"I was," I said. "I was in the shower." He nodded, shifting the brown paper bag he held.

"In case you're wondering why I'm all wet," I said.

"Are you?" he replied. "That is a nice outfit, though."

"Come in," I said. "What's in the bag?"

"Breakfast."

He walked past me and began transferring the contents to the room's tiny refrigerator: eggs, bacon, orange juice, a half-dozen doughnuts. "Breakfast is the most important meal of the day, right?" he said. "How'd you sleep? I
slept rotten."

"Me too," I told him. "I missed you."

"I'm sorry," he said, about a half beat ahead of me.

"I am," I said.

"No, it was my fault."

For a little while more, we argued about where to place the blame, sure now that it didn't matter. Then we kissed and, with a little help from us both, the towel I was in slipped and we were lying on the bed. Matthew hadn't been wearing much more than I (running shorts and a tee shirt) and was soon out of them. We grinned at each other, kissed through smiles. I felt like laughing. I pulled him on top of me, wanting the weight of him. Then he was inside me, and I felt myself opening to him. I hugged him as we moved together in a slow silent rhythm. "I love you," I whispered. "I love you, Matt."

He looked startled, and I realized it was the first time I'd said that to him.

"I love you," he said, and kissed me.

When we were through, lying in each other's arms, pleasantly dozing, it was Matthew who first thought of Timmy.

"We'd better get dressed," he said, "I don't want to be part of your son's primal experience."

"You were just part of his mother's," I said, yawning, running my fingers lightly down his chest. "I'm starving."

I went into the bathroom, and when I came out it was to the sound of Matthew laughing wildly at a Roadrunner cartoon on television while Timmy, still in his pajamas, looked on in amazement.

"It's funny," Matthew explained.

The fog had burned away and the sun was out by the time we finished breakfast, and we headed again for the beach. A light breeze came in off the water. The sky was clear, the sea calm. Everything was sharp edged and bright with sunlight. The sand was cool, still a little damp from the mist that had come in the night. We put the blanket down and lay in the sun a while, and then Matthew and I went down to the water. Timmy stayed up on the beach, playing in the sand. By the time I came out he was sweaty and looking very bored.

"I'm boiling hot," he said.

"You should go in the water then," I told him, spreading suntan lotion over my legs and arms. "Cut it out, Tim." He was showering sand around and it was sticking to me.

"Mom?"

"What, honey?" I said.

"Will you come in with me?"

"I just got out, honey. Matthew's there."

Timmy shrugged. I watched him edge toward the water, pretending to himself he didn't care where he was walking. He skittered along the line of foam, daring himself to go further. I saw Matthew notice him. Wait, I thought, let him do it himself. He heard me somehow, turned away. I watched them like figures in a ballet, Timmy's hesitant entrance into the surf, Matthew's seeming unawareness, all the time moving closer to him. Then Matthew's faked surprise. He showed Timmy how to jump when the waves approached, lift himself above them. Soon they were diving into the crests of the waves, riding them in on their stomachs. I heard Timmy's high-pitched laugh as he splashed at Matthew.

I closed my eyes and lay back, the sun sizzling me into a doze, a warm thoughtlessness. It was one of those rare moments that seem out of time, a stasis in which there is no regret over what has happened and no anxiety over what will I felt myself floating on the sea of sand, cradling free. Then there were shouts and drops of water sprayed over me and I looked up at the faces of Matthew and Timmy, blue-lipped, hair slicked with water. Still floating, light as air, I let them pull me to my feet and together we ran to the sea.
Emily's Kittens

The babies died last night
small, perfect and wet
tiny claws, mouths closed
strangled by umbilicals.
She was interbred,
there was no instinct,
no animal left in her.
She stared at them,
licked them a bit,
but took no real interest,
had no understanding.

Emily is scared, of monsters,
people, the dark. I know a lady
that has poison she says.
Maybe Monica was poisoned, maybe
she didn't know her babies
because they were poisoned.

The witch did it.
She is the one prowling
the basement windows, knocking
branches, breaking twigs.
She creaks the floorboards,
makes the dogs howl at the moon.

Emily has created a religion
of resistance. She clutches
her fear, fights for it.
Emily, let's read a book about
faeries. No, she says. no.
Feeding the Cat

for K. D.

I.
This mother is sick.
Get milk from the icebox.
Listen to her sticky tits.
And she coughs, chokes
on her own life.

How she loves those kittens
sucking her dry.
Loves them enough
to let them flap like straps
around her tail.

She takes in air, food
and gives it out again
like a country mailbox,
the small door of her,
the tired hinge opens,
and opens and opens again.

II.
I dream about the cat,
the no-name cat.
I dream she is spitting out sickness
on the couch where I sleep.

This cat has come into my dream
like a knife.
She cuts up from darkness,
tosses me,
makes me cry.

I want to put her to sleep,
send her into death's garden,
fill her with light
III.
I am filled with
the beautiful pain of fall.
My children grow away from me,
away from the fire of summer.
And like a dimming star
I want to keep all their light.
It is the same every year.

On this long night before winter
the cat follows me through the house,
comes to sit beside me.
We know we love what smothers us,
love the thin air,
and wait for the sleeve of snow
to soften the boundary lines,
conceal the fields of separation.
a bird—
of any family,
small and bright—
rises
startled
from a cattail thicket

wide and wide,
the freeway
to the refinery and taking
in a mud-gray creek,
tribes speak
color
the self-evident over
and patient
dancing on the dark street corner
men who by their lack of grace
are reconciled
shuffle
cold millennium
through
pavement
that a weed
become domesticated corn

ceremony
forgotten
to the city
with insignificant return

is of this furnace
a lace of bad soil,
and to suffer in work,
if given sight
to see it,
making
eating
Households

several maxims

the blind can be raised
doubtlessly without
a shout, addressing,
pants can slip
a foot between
the breath & tongue
d to at least half of what
waists in the goal.
all that spines a faint

preparatory for the sock
collects tattoos as muscles
move to condiments. care
to carefully coddles
the toddler standing in the sun
dry reigns of our assistance.
a triangular exacts a rule
hasty as a portal
drawers space. the bureau

bins into folds firmly
folded suddenly hot,
blazes into lasso as the gait

that dogs across. the awning
spawns a bed, pins
the cone to funnel

drop. sleep soon
takes its gentle toll.
the cough in the room

s peaks at the very top
ple of the voice
s kids out of crack

ing throats turn into
bass. beware, the catch
can slide often off.
Going to Sea

a chantey

a ship at rock, wakes, terns
in circles, swirling out of
semblance, the way a salt
settles in to jaw. from no visible source
helms, soundless in night shift
from pinch perfectly blue
fast as might seams done.
all wrappages, hulls
are naturally imposed
by their surroundings: the shore
's oil of loam, the coast
's in to motion, one-liner at a time, disclosing
the depth & tenacity of tease,
the very air of the, by which a liver's
undefined. true, the mountains
have climbed for a little recreation

In touch with their
travails the tongue
and mind are a sailor
's mainstay.
behind hermeneutics, or, rasping
the buoy, run with a spark
into what stretches will
on the strength of crosswinds
create a current straight
to gravity. but even the trunk
in the hold's bound by hokum
when would's put into hock, like rigging
for underway voyages. resolution's
the cause of scurvy, the butt of the bosun's lash. the conqueror's always a comic
berthing his bully with acts & machet(e)
ing his way through the reigning forests
of intentionality. as stern's
to sternum, the breast rests
on what's over, where you've land
ed at last.
The Divers of Acapulco

at night the daring divers of Acapulco
plunge from the cliffside at twenty minutes after eight.
it is like a religious event for many in the crowd
accordingly attended by families, lovers, souvenir sellers,
   las damas de la noche,
and the vaguely bored. boys trying to pick up
a girl & the girls fantasizing their lifes
on the brink of emotional enthrallment that they
may be snatched for love
in that sudden drumroll moment by their hero.

they have assembled along the Quebrada.
many have waited more than an hour for the event,
the stage has been lit by powerful lanterns
that add to this drama
for they conceal more than they illuminate:
nature's danger can never be enhanced
beyond imagination the vast pacific sky gone
west in orange blue ink water night
& the band at the hotel el Mirador plays
sweet notes of clarinet electric guitar & xylophone tambourine.
children blow bubbles into the surfs ravine.
the divers appear.
these men are indians
a national treasure of basic agility
& closeness to nature
who walk thru the crowd mingling with the applause,
men of the people aware of their respect
they enter the water from which they were borne a long time
ago, like seals playing clown they taunt the crowd
then one climbs blinking eyes one hundred feet up the side
to the top where sits a shrine of incandescent bulbs & glass
and the diver kneels & prays an incantation:
santa maria mother of pearls, protect me,
now and at the hour of my death,
thy humble winged serpent.
& each prayer of the crowd sends
mother of jesus kisses to the stars
& they are the stars tonight
that will fall into the sea out of a virgin constellation.
the diver now the priest ignites the torches
as lights go out
& it is only himself
in the eye of fame that honors the dead
a torch in each hand
to make the calculated leap & fly
into the sea

& it is no more than this & the crowd disperses
thru the vendors into the hot night
of corpse dream on sheets of shallow sweat,
infants crying & the poor indios asleep in the hills,
lonely imagination,
it is no more than this
and tomorrow
the sea will blind us again
by the sun.
Raoul the Shepherd

I.
The night before I began my “service militaire”
I slept in the grass with my sheep. I filled
the trembling space between them. It was cold
but I knew how to hush the wind gusts by rolling
my head in their dirty wool. I slept prayer-
like, folded my knees and cupped
the warm scrape of their tongues in my hands.

II.
We were driving near sheep. I could smell
through the ring of rocking soldiers, but I didn’t know
how to say, “I’d like to stop and smell some more.”
We were rolling cigarettes and someone yelled
for beer. There was singing. I leaned on the door
and thought, “Damn it, sing with them,” but the sour beer
tasted like wolves and I clenched my hands.

III.
I died yesterday in an army van.
turning a cold, blue bend in the Belledonne.
A spot of ice grabbed us, swung us with all our weight,
made us a whirlwind on the mountain.
We howled, but I was the only one
to spill onto the snow. And my prayers didn’t know
how to keep the quiet bleating there in my throat.
Rationalization for Disc Jockeys
Who Have no Selection Variation

Music is to be enjoyed,

Digested

Slowly,
easily
as fried steak w/ fried onions.

It repeats itself
as do the disc jockeys
spinning the same songs

around and around until every frail lady
with a torn shopping bag hums the tune
or blows the words in a recognizable semblance—

disc jockeys spinning the same records
around and around until every lady is frail
with a torn shopping bag—

disc jockeys spinning the same songs
around and around until every torn shopping bag
is a lady masticating
the music,
swallowing the music,
drumming her belly,
walking the Every Good Boy Does Fine line streets
with her whole note feet,
playing and getting played by all whom she meets.
Concatenations abound. The music is gulped.
The world is bouncing
up and down:
Loose from its axis, it springs into the heavens,
where the angels greet us
with saxes and trumpets and fried steaks w/ fried onions
and no one has time
for bad breath.
We're all singing the music.
$3.00

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