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Bard

MINKA

The pen nib remembers the sultan
of the Ottoman Empire and the last
Tsar of Blgaria. Nothing is very far,
a vowel is just a song along the way

among the broken jars. Rough roads. Bad
boys, the consonants. "Allay your journey,
travellers, lighten your purses—
I am Digenes the Highwayman, and I preach."

Extreme neurosis not necessarily an argument
for the presidency. Nature is the *other*, always,
and we perish quickest who forget it.
But *everything* is still the same as *me*.

The moving winter sits and having sat
moves on and leaves its piety behind
en forme de old men struggling through snow
praying to the little gods inside our underwear,

Lord Muffler, and He of the Lapel. Planet
for which we failed to be designed!
The pen nib gold iridium and crowded with baroque
can write a word its wielder doesn't know

and scribes the other side of Saturn puzzle
how earthly doodlers happened to discover
the ruling dynasty on Corax 12 and scribble
it on pink memos on the refrigerator door—

for nothing can't be said. Or if it so be
the pen can write it without thinking
—reflection is the enemy of prophecy—
and intercourse is bounded by remorse.

What is says is some name looks Russ to me
all curlicues and uncials and I don't know,
my writing's not so good with it,
point too thin and barrel fat but yet

there is a sensuous presence to the thing
like writing with an antique telephone
or taking a footbath in a soup tureen
surrounded by chamberlains and candlelight.

Writing is so intimate, approximate,
expensive, embarrassing and long—
the moving finger takes its time with it
and even so is gone before I understand

so I look out and look upon the snow.
Brown ink says: a tree, many of me.
Black ink says I stream and nothing stays—
yet at the end of every sayable remark

an ampersand stands up bold and plump
like a penguin on the pack ice promising
life in the unlikeliest places, always
one more word to be disclosed.

16 December 1992

THE FRAMEWORK

I call it this way
because the birds
are here again
some hundreds of them
exact in the empty sycamore

whiter than ever
in the mist above this snow

when you expect me
to make some claim
about the nature of my mind
my life needing
what it does

some weird Scandinavian
compulsions built of birch and ice
and strapped around the rib-cage

nothing like,
nothing like,

my life needs you
and carries me to myself

to be done with the valuable nuisance of being wrong.

17 December 1992
a draft of it, for Charlotte

.

WITHOUT A BOAT

Well because I was spiriting around as calm and quick as a Gypsy in those surly days in murky weather, near where the dead are buried and blissfully forgotten their old softly buzzing forcefield chain snaked a lariat round my footprints whenever I tried to walk calm, happens I ran into the elmwood shaft that propped her wagon against the blue stone chunks of the sea-mole run out a quarter-mile into the waves during the reign of the last Queen. Down low in the spreeing waters spooled a coracle, its slim red-haired navigatrix calling me up Garsuin Garsuin, she said, it's you I want come down. A moi! And I have to own my own tried to be classy words toothed back out in chaste agreement yet sounded not as strange as I should have thought. *Print a mathiggery!* I heard her cry in some offhand keltish, but a whole pie is too rich for her meek squash. So we desisted as we were, and just waited for the shadow to filter down through the whin and find the water. No thorns there.

There is an everywhere sort of feeling about the day— a flurry of rain and a scarf of cloud looped round that doesn't keep the cold out, how could it, cold is a genius for finding its way in, a deft-fingered enterer, a knave of shudder.

So I came back at last for tea but not with her, with my own snug inscape of horsehair and chintz, the smell of earlier comforts lingers, cakecrumbs in the deep furrows of the divan. Oh and a word on a paper is so pale at that hour, so intriguing, so mystery, I picked up and read, and one word led strictly to another and the evening seeped up from the damp ground and silenced my worries.

I read about a stuffed lamb and biscuits made with galingale, I read about a place in Russia where the grass grows upside down, I read about an operatic heroine who sang so sweetly the composer never set down another note of music after he had heard her swooning cabaletta.

From time to time I remembered the woman in the boat. But not otherwise from the way in which I remembered the dew on the burdock leaf this morning or the hare looking at me when I turned round suddenly one Halloween twilight when I was nine, and since then I could somehow never manage to

hunt a wren, let alone a thing with timid eyes. There are things that happen to us, and memory is just one of the ways they happen. And when you're finished reading, why you just fold the paper up and toss it on the heap beside the fireplace. The cat looks up then goes to sleep again.

17 December 1992

That we should wait — but No, he said, the miracle
is in not waiting, ever
for the truth to tell. The only
one is now. I listened marvelling like apples.

18 December 1992
for Charlotte

NOT SO OLD A MAN BACK FROM ABYSSINIA

Then we heard him saying: "Quick, the so-called 'litmus paper of the soul' is not enough for human tragedy, We need an hour with creases in its palm, a church made entirely of oil. Then we will be miracles again!"

Such monuments!

"The Church understood sin, but sinners did not. The mouth tastes everything, and the brain decides. The mouth has no heart."

And we were afraid, listening to him.

"I came back to take away poetry, or at least to hide it down there in the cellars under the old church, where to get any of it at all, in any language, ancient or modern, you have to spend an hour in squalor, dealing with the rat and the spider and the faces you think you see of people who have died, an hour of understanding, before the slightest green word pushes up from the awful silence you carry around as a heart."

We were silent in the sense of his scorn, we were like balloonists over a silent city, fearing every steeple below, every shimmer of lightning up above. We were like an oilslick on the quiet harbor, and a gull slicing through the fog towards the fishing smack come home with half-empty nets—the sea also was turning from us.

"The sea, yes, and the bitter little lake Rome and Carthage squabbled over for two hundred years, and the granary, and the peddlers who haul canaries from the tropics and lionskins and loaves of salt blue and hard to grate."

Now we didn't know what he meant, or how such things as he was saying could have anything like meaning, at least as we understood it. The way birds have or do when they sing, or rocks when they shut up.

"But you don't understand. I come back to take away any lingering sense of home I might have kept to torture myself with all those years in the land of flies. And now I come as a broken stranger to this strange place my neat young mind tells me is my home. A fig for such homecomings, I have arrived at the bounds of nowhere, and found it strange. Help me from this chair, I want to go to the bathroom."

Some of us helped him to the little door, some of us sat and talked about him, not to much purpose, while we waited for him to come back. Why did he smell the way he did? Why does

our wine taste disagreeable when he looks at us over the thick edge of the dirty glass he pulled out of his cloth bag, refusing any cleaner or more proper? Children go by on their bicycles outside, and old women shake their fists at the lowering sky. A mouse floats head down in a flask of alcohol behind the bar, the liquid tinted faintly blue (like the shell of a hen's egg on a Thursday morning). The man has been in the bathroom a long time. Maybe we should stop talking. Maybe we should go away to the regions from which he is now returning. We should have asked the name of his ship. We should do so when he comes out.

What did he have against poetry, churches, home? The man who had been standing at the counter all this while finished his milky yellowgreen pastis and said, Well, well, I'm not sure, and went out into the street. Evidently his tawny dog had been waiting for him, and the two of them now stepped quickly away in sunlight. The homecomer came out of the bathroom, and we helped him back to the table.

"You think this is just an attitude, of mine. It is not. I have no attitudes. I came home only to tell you it is no good, no good to go and no good to come, far is worthless and near is empty. Stay. Sit on your chairs and think hard. You don't even have to say anything. I have said it all for you."

He didn't say things after that. But the flies went on talking fifteen to the dozen, and the priests kept sailing by in the windy street and our cigarettes burned down to our knuckles and were renewed and the straw hat of the oldest drinker, faintly rimmed with more than one summer of sweat, sat turned upward catching whatever light might rest with us. It is no good to come back, that much was clear. The rest of what he said, well, we can think about that too, whenever we have nothing better to do.

18 December 1992

VARIATIONS ON HADRIAN

Scared colorless you're
on your way away the way
there is no answer
to all the cute remarks
you made me make my whole
life that leaves us now
you guest of these bones
you kept me company
whoever I am now
that you're leaving
soul, soft pretty little soul.

2.
Or aimless wander tender
blindly all the lust
you leave me now

we had been comrades
for the nones
and champions of laughter

now who will be
the butt of the jest
I thought was me?

.....[continues]

18 December 1992

for Charlotte

Scraps of certainty surround me,
I almanac as if to truth.
A flag or whetstone, a mill
turning in the forests north of France.
Garance. Every landscape
a quilt of vanished kingdoms, even here
in this municipal world.

O

Flags. Maps. coats of Arms.
Emblems of the Great Religions.
And the greatest of all these
the Alphabet. And where they end
your voice begins
talking in the twilight.

O

Overhead now your footsteps by the bathtub
means my morning. Lost as Merlin
I wait for your word down here.

O

There is a kind of enchantment
in ordinary time. Symbolism
of the Eight-Spoked Wheel. A white
letter, last one in the alphabet,
fading into the, as the, sky.

19 December 1992

LAST LAKE

for Charlotte

By the dark boathouse
a melodious wave lap
lifted the prussian dory
repeatedly against the jetty

through the spare lindens
bats negotiated the sounds
of our sighs we who
undertook a foolish journey

by land and by hand
to carry the news to night
herself claiming the earth
with all that ancient tenderness

we answer with our deaths.

19 December 1992

THE DECEMBER THEOLOGY

for Charlotte

Thoth has a use for us,
geese, common, brown
grey to His rare ibis,

scarlet, surely, of dawn
custodian, where the night
(that suburb) hid

the commonplace glories
of our primal kind
"the language, the

language" namely
to listen
when it speaks.

The rest is rows
of houses stretching east
along Long Island

(his land, Id land)
that fell out of dawn
and does to this day

it rose at sunrise
from *Hid Lantis the Great*
and wouldn't you (pyre

by pyre to forgive
information into flame
the fragrant smoke

to heaven high
also to hear) bear it,
the metal petalled rose

whose clangor
rouses us
to a dream of being

no such word.
Cornfields.
Sky full of geese.

20 December 1992

IN the beginning the children wanted to be more intelligent than the pigeons that wandered through their mother's rows of salt-green tomato plants. They wanted to tell everyone they knew about the chances they had taken to learn to fly — all the bitter winter mornings leaning out of the windows always afraid the gleaming glass of the window sash would come crashing down on them, always afraid their parental inspectors would arrive before they had mastered the elbow-thrust and the breastbone push and the agonizing shoulder-blade retroflash. They wanted to know everything in the world about the clothesline and the physics of the galvanized iron pulley or was it zinc that rolled the line so smoothly out, the shirts and underwear went out and out into the sunlight over the yard, into the wind that cleaned it better than soap, then later brought the clothes back to mother's hand smelling like the whole world out there. Smelling like birds. Watching blue shirts on the line you could learn how to fly. And with flying, learning to do it was the best part. When you actually were flying, you had to work so hard to keep your heavy body up in the empty air you hardly got to see the world you worked so hard to find from above. There it was, down there, but you were trapped in your body up here, all your energy spending itself just on being where you are. So you knew what people know, and now you knew what pigeons know, and you worked hard to make them the same. But windows were still windows. Women sat on the sill with their backs to the world

and pulled the sashes down on their laps to give the panes a good scrubbing with vinegar and newspaper, and you were always afraid they were going to fall out. And pigeons were out there and never flew through the windows into your crowded bedroom with the Life of Napoleon lying face down open on the floor under the edge of the bed. Never.

20 December 1992

[Call this the First Chapter in a Book of Birds, and perhaps the only one.]

SUN IN CAPRICORN

for Charlotte

The deprivations
inscribe themselves
as prayer

the world we lack
summons us
to possess.

Greedy easy
succulent leaf
shadow of food

falls on waiting.
The thing you mean
is elsewhere

by definition.
Meadow glass
cat ice of the Jerseys

will the cup
shatter on its way
to the lip

will the moon
suddenly succumb
to all your questions

and fall
in the green shadows?
We rule the earth

with our yesses,
the fugue
that winter is,

the bells of not listening.
Understanding,
a smile in matter

lingering,
to be what a sound it
a hand on your arm

to be in place
by millions,
nightfall

soons us with a kiss
that the child
plucks from the lawn

awkward handed bunch of
wet round leaves
and feeds them to the lion

one of two in concrete
guarding the steps
wedges the green

into the waiting mouth
o all his life
he'll serve the Galaxy

that mere suburb
of the Actual,
the thing with boundless hands.

21 December 1992

HOW A CHILD LEARNS

to pray:
Be this other than it is
and the far close

he's taught but
what he wants
so desperately no church

consents to wish:
let this
be this.

21 December 1992

The discipline of sunlight
instructs the earth

or tries to
and the quiet wet dark places
under the sparkling stream

do as they please.

21 December 1992

S o these are the voices of those children who were

afraid of traveling far by air and chose the haunted place the one we never do understand the earth that Tesla taught us carries messages clear and fast and far—without the intrusions of the Neutral Angels who haunt the air with nervy music we hear as static— that is static, Bobby, my father said, as he explained how this weird thing a Crystal Set worked, the radio they had when he was younger and had a Cat's Whisker and a Crystal—I never saw the cat and the crystal did not gleam—the earth free of all distractions vapors moods and divagations this honest earth that knows only one message forward to address—and Tesla said we'll listen when the earth speaks—the message propagates in rock and soil and no one ventures— Nikola or Nikla his first name which is supposed to mean Nicholas but is really like Nickel, Nickl, named like Kobold = cobalt, from some darksome elf in a central European cavern or mine—the feminine is Nixie as in our own pond—in the mines of Croatia he set out to listen to the discussions earth maintains constantly with itself and all who listen—im Schooße der Erde we are to find the jewel of — wait a minute we were talking about children what is this jewel—the blue light must come from somewhere—it is the blue light one finds by standing deep beneath the ground and saying the sound of the letter S

quietly until the nearby earth begins to glow with that light and the whole underhood is transformed into the parlor of those who have beheld the light and now spend the rest of their hours in pursuit and contemplation of—tune in next week same time same station for the sound of the blue light.

Winter



is the letter of memory of mirror
I am waiting here
where the flavor of the tree
tests the night's memory

is it now or another?
is it a wheel
set turning in the house of a sister

because alone?
All that way is tree,
all that way a mirror.

Essay on the Mirror: House of logic and scary, insinuations of what we see. Why should we be looking? Magic dances and logic sits, or so the students argued, bleeding from the foot. At the end of every lecture, the professor shrouded himself in the same black cloak and went home along Silver Street to the black entrance-way to the narrow house where up a crazy staircase he crept to live in a draughty garret from which several doors that looked like windows opened into various dimensions not represented on the map and not even, most of them, thought of by speculators of the various Black Mirrors and Grand Designs the lame alchemists had left in their wake like cake crumbs from a picnic at Versailles after the King has been beheaded. O the dark work of mirrors, o to amplify the seen without augmenting the light!

So when the mirror
empties the room
it gazes into

am I not also
vanished
into pure

seeing and nothing seen?

22 December 1992

