

Life Masks

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L'envoi

“Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt
weiss’ was ich leide” *Goethe*

My longing is a kind of Kantian splendor
Mindly and shaping, but *in sich* abstract;
It wants an object, flesh and blood and tender
To imagined touch, and tingling of fact,
Else all my courtesy is empty form.
Until I hold you I am left in desperate harm.

Aubade

First a shout, something like “Hey, Bill”,
a title, an attention-getter that settles
comfortably among my expectations.
Then the words that cannot be made out,
not whispers or even anything supposed to be
secret, but plain, boldly spoken things,
rough even (from the voice), only they don’t
quite find their way wakeningly, sensibly
through the bedroom window at 7:00 A.M.
And now they are mysterious (they might
as well be French, like that time in Paris),
charged with all possible significance
so that my ear strains after them, as after
nuances in a line of Shakespeare, as after
Revealed Truth (Who was it said truth is overheard?).
But the speaking tongues flicker and disappear,
leaving behind, eager and inexplicable too,
the tweetings of the birds and rush of commuter cars
and me, awakened to my usual dark.

Hamlet knew it, when Shakespeare

sent him early to his death, for practice;
and two millennia before them, Socrates
as wise as anyone, I suppose, knew it
maintaining philosophers should spend their lives
rehearsing one breathless moment's movement
toward the unknown; and you know it:
sometime, anytime, toothbrush in hand, or fork,
or at the office when the vault of some filecabinet
yawns more ominously than usual, or later
in bed with your lover, perhaps, practicing at life,
you hear a click, or your ear buzzes you dizzy
on a summer's day, or against the cool, fresh pillow
you make out a muted thumping, and behind it,
beyond it, around it, nothing, for the rest *is* silence.

Marvelous to drink the riddle of October

the first spell of the cold, the first brightness
under which death lurks;
with the universe still packed full
to venture upon the wind,
to move easily among the small things:
fears and blue skies and preparations;
to breathe only the best dreams.
As a bird his song
I carry my love always at my lips.

First Cup of Coffee, a daydream for S

If the morning coffee is black enough, so that
the kitchen light swims on its surface, swaying
gently, romantic as any moon on mysterious lake,
then anything is possible. One stares
into the cup, glazy eyed as a mystic or gypsy
with a crystal ball, and the whole world is there.
And one can dream others, counter-worlds
beyond anything in Baudelaire, places where
people age in reverse, where the laws of physics
are completely haywire, places without work,
so long as this one's safely floating there.
And best of all if, draining toward the bottom
it disclose its grains in dark haruspic shapes,
a bell, perhaps, to twist one's ears, or lamb
(or black sheep rather), or maybe just a letter,
lazily serifed, completely familiar from being
seen pretty much everywhere, yet changed completely
now by membership in a dear one's name.

Antiques

Careful not to spill,
we perch in not quite comfort sipping tea
(chairs, courtesy of one Louis or another)
and I wonder, beneath the chat of you and me,

at the centuries old wood
supporting us, its weathers other than our own,
its blooms, and the lovers who embraced
beneath it of a May, and are now gone.

A Small Secular Song

From half-shut eyelids flows a sleepy light;
the abstract, tousled hair (a stitch of troth)
the bare arms trembling, bordering on delight:
here is no inspiration in us both

that's unrehearsed, no sudden genius flashes
unforeshadowed in an ancient grace—
a moment's fluttering of primordial lashes
reechoes time and time and place and place.

But somehow it's new-minted, and has shown
our passion marvelously new, what's ours
to here-and-now, our momentary own
untold in the countless others' countless stars.

And so we lie back easy, kiss, accept
the past we form, the future of us made;
we are the world and what in it is kept—
in being fated we're creating fate.

Lear's Wife

It was good luck for you to die
before our memory began, fortune
that you should witness three young girls,
sugar and spice, etc.
and nothing more. You were spared
all the bad sex and the gore, neglect of old age,
the whole tragedy of wrinkles.
Gnothi sauton? Perhaps, you knew
yourself as slenderly as he,
but what did it matter? You slipped
namelessly away, you were not hurt by mirrors,
and had no tragic part to play; except,
perhaps, as he would remember you
wild and slender in his arms, more fair
than the fairest daughter, giving him love
as due, your dark hair tousled,
your sleepy smile floating up to him,
the white map of your body a world kingdom.

Young Woman Combing Her Hair

It is so long; trimmed with sunlight
it covers and obscures
the Botticelli face and velvet eyes.
Long, sensual strokes she gives it
so that the soft gleam trembles there,
and then, with one sweep, she flings it back.
Now all her body flames
and a smile dances in her eyes.

In my distress
in my days made of tears and winter
in my raging solitudes which hurl me
in despair on empty beds or evenings
I will remember this blithe moment
and scatter the flocks of clouds.

The cat in the window is very lazy of the sunlight

of the breeze in the tall, shaggy locust trees
of the birdcalls too distant to be of use
of the hour of noon which can bewitch us all.
The cat in the window
green-eyed against the green of summer
concerns himself only on occasion
with an insect or a butterfly passing by.
The cat in the window, sure,
will never notice us or mind or tell
how we have spent our noontime well
and happy and almost alone.

Like a fig, or maybe like the universe

I open you, and this is the emblem of my love
like a rose, or a ring. Older than youth
your body beckons, and through a moment
from eternity to eternity I pass.
Your hair is a jungle hot with endless August,
your breasts fresher and smoother than sand-dunes
in the morning, teased by a Sophoclean sea;
for there is something ageless to you, like the sea,
some prism in you of this human life
counting its minutes in ashes, and yielding
its moments to eternity. Like a fig
you define for me this moment, like that one
when we watched a dove sing through the air
on a day in spring too fragile to remember
except in you, when we clung together
under the universe in our passing.

For Sara

With our house
its soft lamplight and seventy or so degrees
around you, a cloak
banishing the chill of the March night,
you are sleeping—as beautiful as I remember,
the image of peace. And yet I know well
the troubled places of your dreams
where you must travel now without me
where I cannot help, though I kiss your cheek
or press your hand. Or if I am with you there
I am without my will and strength
to protect you from the chill, the darkness within.
Sleep reminds us that there is no growing one.
Yet for these years, like paired trees
sharing the same weathers, the same shade and sun
and breeze, we have grown at a like angle
from the earth, rooted together when we least think it,
bearing each other's shape
greening and coloring the same. Though distinct
though dying, my life is never without your touch,
like that first kiss you made me wring from you
longed for and sweet in the having.

Apples—for Sara

In late May the season stretches to its solstice.
We awake to open windows, curtains billowing,
the morning madrigals of the birds. We awake
in a fresh intensity of green: full leaves,
the lush velvet of the grass. The blossoms
of last month are blown and gone, and in their place
the green beginnings of the season's fruit:
apples, cherries, pears, all hued alike,
all filled with the enormous energy
of their different promises. In late May,
in morning, one can almost see the colors
of October, the reds of the apples, the yellows
of the pears, one can almost hear the rustling
resistance of the branches as the fruit is picked,
ripe and chilled in the equinoctial breeze.

Grunts

Thoughts were always easier, able to wear
the words we gave them like models or tailor's dummies.
Ideas, well dressed, are always quite presentable,
whether in the black-tie of the conference paper,
or in classroom tweeds, or even, dressed down
and casual, for a bit of cocktail-in-hand smalltalk
(with ice-cubes jiggling). Feelings are more difficult,
though they like their liquor too. Sometimes it seems
they don't want to be dressed at all, but to go
quite nakedly silent, save for the jewels they always
bear in 'meaningful gazes'; sometimes they grunt
or stutter, primitive, cro-magnon things, fur-draped
and hairy, smelling of blood and grease and musk,
insistently gesticular. Yet these bear fire,
and if one could only see, in their cavernous dark,
cave paintings, miracles of articulate shape and line,
sacrifice and conquest and the holy life.