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MARVELOUS THINGS WITHOUT NUMBER

Our duty is to see with the eyes of the gods.

STÉPHANE MALLARMÉ

After forty or so summers you kind of get
the idea: the slow deepening of the plum-blue dusk
that offers a backdrop for the stately silhouettes
of disconsolate, sentinel-like telephone poles;
the fading chorus of evening birdsong; the sharp hollow
pong of an aluminum bat making contact
with the ball somewhere off in the distance followed by
the joyful and at the same time somehow mildly
forlorn minor uproar of a clutch of children cheering;
eventless days at the beach, the scorched sand
stinging beneath your feet, the sand in
your clothes and your hair, a relentless ubiquitous
grit that remains undislodged after any
number of showers and shampoos; the familiar
dirt that collects underneath your fingernails
and your hair growing longer; careless
afternoons endured and discharged in the backyard
hammock or a languid folding chair by the lake,
reading Amy Clampitt, reading Rilke;
teenagers playing an eternal game
of Monopoly or Risk that might well be
the very same game they started last summer;
the same hummingbirds taking the same flight paths
back to the endless empty abundance
of the same backyard flowers and feeders . . .
Some friends are renewing their vows, they were married
a decade ago. Some friends are driving
up to one of the casinos on Friday
to hear a tribute band who have modeled themselves
after Led Zeppelin or Journey.

A friend who left for the East Coast two years ago has flown back to Chico to take photos of Mount Lassen exactly one hundred years after its catastrophic eruption. For a while it feels as if everything is a reenactment of something that has already happened: even dumping a skitter of Raisin Bran into a bowl and then pouring milk over it, or sitting on the porch or trying on sneakers takes on the aura of a ritual. Are you trying to deny time and change, to say that death will have no authority here, or are you celebrating the fact that everything is in flux and ungraspable, or is the season doing one or the other of these things for you? Mornings glow like dreams, like memories, with a radiance that has been lying latent in the earth all night, you can do it again (whatever *it* is) but you can't do it over: the beautiful girl, kissed, can't be un-kissed (and who would want that anyway? But you might), and so you repeat, repeat, repeat, feeling rich with existence and time and a kind of exhaustion you have learned to savor; the end of Side B, after all, simply means that you flip the record over and listen to Side A again. And did you say that life would always be this way, or were you told that by someone in the past, and now hang on to that belief in the face of what must be mounting but, for now, still invisible evidence to the contrary? Stay invisible, you say to it, stay, you whisper, stay just as you are, just a little bit longer, which is just another way of telling the story you tell the children every night, how the birds and the rivers remembered the songs even when

the people forgot, and how, when the people
regained the ability to remember,
they learned the songs again from the birds
and the rivers. The children's wide, trusting eyes
as you say this, as if what you said was, to use
that phrase we used to like to use, the gospel truth.
It's only a story, after all. You mean
no harm. No one means any harm. The world
is ancient, full of shades and spirits, not all of them
friendly, and we do with it what we can.

THAT LIFE

And did you think that life (that begins like a fire and consumes
and did you think that life (it unites you with beasts, you hold it in common
that life (given to you freely, but in what dream would you have pursued it
has been a series of standard answers (you put on your shoes and walked
to expected questions (to the city where they said the oracle was
and did you think that life (there is only one, despite the lies of the elders
has haunted you like a lost child (I mean wolves, yes, but also insects and clams
and are you being dramatic (I know you would deny it but you are dancing
or are you (a space is opening up on the inside, that's where the world is
parsing the words of the oracle (where the world goes, and yes you are dancing
and a space opens up on the inside of the world (yes that's where you go
and you go (and a space opens up, and the oracle falls into silence
like a child (there is only one, you fall silent, you fall silent then you go
to the city (where the fire and the beasts are, and the city falls into silence
and did you think that life? (and did you think *that*, life?

AT LIMANTOUR

At the water's edge you feel the mind of the planet
as if entering it from a different direction: the sharp
dry blades of the yellow and pale-green beach grasses,
the earth's cover versions of itself, clouds wisping
in the thin far-off blue, giving voice to a different
music, an alternative tone of thought,
and your own memories that for so long have perplexed you
fitting at last like jigsaw puzzle pieces
into a larger whole,
the entire interlocking superstructure something
you could not have guessed at but which now seems entirely
inevitable. What mad chance it is
to be, it is to be here, it is
to be an organism with a body that moves
and senses, gasping and singing,
and about to die if deprived for mere minutes
of the elements that sustain you. Despite
what you've said, the truth is that you do not mind
being loved, being seen in public places, being born
from the bodies of the predecessor animals, and giving
birth, in turn, to other animals,
the ones that will move away from you, to wander
and graze and soil the landscape. Your destiny
is here. If the stars are frozen on their surfaces,
not hot, as you have long suspected, nothing changes:
the crash of the breaking waves will roll down along
the beach to the place where you sit, and then past you,
remaining what it was, and the seeds that have gathered
together and given themselves your name
will not, in the end, refuse their mission. Gasping
and singing and sighing. Trembling in the wind,
trembling like the brittle shaking grasses. Call it dancing.

SELF-PORTRAIT IN INVISIBLE INK

yes that's me
taking half a pill
because I cannot remember
whether I have already
taken one today

so this way
I know I'm wrong
but only a little wrong

and not in which direction

you have done this too
haven't you?
raise your hand if you have
no
the other one

raise your hand if you know
whereof I speak

raise your hand
if you have ever
asked your readers
to raise their hands
knowing they know
you can't see them

yes, you are of my tribe
of that we can now be certain

welcome, friend
here I am
living half a life
because I just can't remember

and this way
I know that I'm dead
but only a little

and not in which direction

welcome, friend
in the glass

at the bottom of the glass

bottomed

boat

are we in this together?
raise your hand if you are
raise your hand if I am
but you're not

raise your hand if
like me

you know whose ghost you want

to hover over this

POEM FOR GORD DOWNIE

You were always there, singing
from the back of the car
as if you were drunk back there dreaming and singing
while I drove aimlessly about the outskirts
of everybody's hometown
learning where the lovers go after dark
and practicing the names that had been rearranged
reassigned to the sacrosanct dark spaces
that remained underneath the crooked branches of the trees
and you were reconnoitering the impenetrable waters
of that vast silent sound
collectively known
as the collective Canadian unconscious
like someone searching for a drowned diver
or a slipped-off wedding ring.
A nation will watch me die, you sang
from back there, and I believed it the way you believe
something that somebody says in their sleep.
Fireworks by the side of the road, Northern Lights
and harbor lights perpetually enticing,
perpetually retreating, holding themselves
at a constant unbridgeable distance from my
ungovernable eyes. I flailed my way to
a first kiss as your face published itself
on every TV screen in every bar.
Last night I dreamed you were in my kitchen,
or else you are a sled dog on the snowy plain,
nuzzling the furry neck of Kurt Cobain.
Dancing to Schoenberg, drinking Schooner in Lunenburg.
And it was really you, wasn't it, who came paddling
past, really you whose psalms and sonics
sang the stoic poles together? I think now that maybe
we were not a nation until we watched you

sing and die. O Gord, I lift this last round
to the sprawling sound of the gravid growlings
you brought up from those dark waters
and the verses you engraved on the vast white wall
of unmusic that we face but cannot force ourselves to face.
Listen now, that wail from the West's waste-effaced margins.
Listen now, these foreign shores, these fallen final invitations.
Listen now, this ceaseless silence you have signed and left behind you.

EARLY MORNING, UPPER BIDWELL PARK

The world drawn like a bowstring

as if to test the returned warrior

and the suitors failing in the room
decorated by Penelope's latest unweavings

When God made the world he did it like this

world-making in the daytime
world-undoing at night

And it has occurred to me that we might be living

in one of the undoings

*

Later she told a lie about their bed

another test
for the returned wanderer

the man who claimed to have spent
so many nights there

and so many nights away

to have had so many dreams there
a pair of love-craft traveling side by side

soft points of contact
soft points of departure
soft points of approximate presence

kiss, coo, murmur, softly shift

*

and then, the ten-year absence

during which news was slow to arrive if it
arrived at all

the night twice as long
the bed twice as cold

*

If I were to make a world
not beginning *ex nihilo* but with what there is

I think there would be more unmaking than making
not that I would undo

the marvelous spatuletail hummingbird,
the right whale, the sunrise, butter-and-eggs,
the green-blooded skink, the Blanding's turtle

these I would let be
but we agree
there are other phenomena
of more recent, more human origin.

things put together by bodies

with eyes and hands like mine.

*

You remember how light our bodies were
when we lifted them into the trees?
How pure the water and the song.
And the unknown sources of water and song.

The little blue butterfly I've been watching

all this time
has finally settled

on the rock like a whisper, folding its wings
like a hand someone has decided not to play.

Its shut-up wings, like the sails of a tiny, delicate boat, are pale.

So much more colorful, for whatever reason,
when it's in the air.

UNEARNED SEASON

the sun still beneath
a bird at the feeder
and a mosquito sent
to trouble me
another summer
universe's origin
our attempts to understand
as if to regenerate
for nightfall
the theater to cover
that social, neighborly
or, if not that, your lover's
tell me, is anything
alien,
a sip
as the night

the horizon and already
a bee at the flower
but by whom?
out of some unrelenting slumber
unearned season
receding before
and gearing up again
necessary conditions
they used to sell oranges in
the scent of human bodies
stench, though your own
is perhaps pleasing
human
truly?
of whiskey counts
before's

and so

you say to yourself

of morning

now and your brain

strawberries

to sing and to do

to sing and aspire to do

to do

no harm done

necessary conditions

the sun just coming up

seized by the odor of

sing and take aim

to sing and to sing and take aim

for once, today,

no harm

ANDRÉ GREGORY SAID

But there is two hard things; that is, to bring the moonlight into a chamber; for, you know, Pyramus and Thisby meet by moonlight.

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

André Gregory said
that he wanted to put
a human head
in a play. From a corpse,
that is to say,
as a way
of making the audience feel
that this was *real*:
lives being lived out
and brought to an end
on this very stage,
which all the world's a,
as we know,
not merely set
and struck
to present
a passing show.
To have us
pass it around,
fresh death in our hands,
to see if we
can withstand
an art that cleaves
so tightly to
things as they are,
if one can stand
another skull
so near one's own,
one on, one off,

one live, one not,
one more performance
of the plot
(if one can withstand
its demands) that's never
quite the same
one night to the next
so there is no question
of *owning*, but only
of being present,
or rather, of having
been, and the having been
having been followed
by a quick exit
pursued by a fill-in-the-
blank, each actor's
pursuer uniquely
his, each audience
member dismembered
in her own manner,
death by silence, death
by moonlight,
death by monologue,
what doesn't kill you
kills another,
what doesn't kill you
makes you stronger,
what doesn't kill you
now kills you
tomorrow, takes just
that much longer.

SCREENSHOTS: *VANYA ON 42ND STREET*

The temperature of the water being
indiscernible from that of the air

so that you can't tell when you have slipped in
and when you are walking about on dry land

or whether the man before you is really
napping, exhausted by the demands

of his acting career, or playing a man
who is napping, exhausted by the demands

of managing a nineteenth-century estate
in agrarian Russia, envisioned by Chekhov,

re-envisioned by a man last seen
in an upscale New York restaurant, having dinner

with a vaguely familiar, somewhat shorter man,
both of them burdened with names and stories

that are theirs and also are not theirs,
both of them performing, both transforming

harshness into loveliness, graffiti-gray day
into vibrant, pulsing, luminous night,

unable to tell, perhaps, when they slip
into or back out of their roles

in this slow-collapsing, this decomposing,
this disappearing theater.

*To have no screen between this part he played
and him he played it for.*

Blue pigment paints mountains and rivers.
A rice cake is painted with powdered rice.

Perhaps in the end, we will find a place,
onstage or off, where we can rest.

*We shall see the angels. We shall see
the whole sky sparkling, all diamonds.*

SCREENSHOTS: *NOSTALGHIA*

And in conclusion, isn't that just what our life is all about,
to get across the empty pool before the candle flickers out?

THE GARDEN OF EARTHLY DELIGHTS

Because order matters: breakfast, then lunch,
then dinner, dessert following the main course;
the orgasm, yes, but the foreplay before;
old age, yes, but first youth:
Dante's *Divine Comedy* only considered
a "comedy" in so far as it ends
in Paradise, having first given us
a grand tour of the Inferno and then
Purgatory, as methodical if not
quite so easy as A, B, C;
so that, when we look at Bosch's *Garden
of Earthly Delights*, it matters whether
we read it, as readers of English will tend to,
from left to right, beginning in Paradise,
where Dante's masterpiece ends,
then passing through that ebullient garden
bursting with the planet's abundance of pleasures
on the way to that culminating, grotesque,
and, one assumes, irrevocable final
destination, the grim fate that we, in Dante,
climb out of—we, that is, the readers,
the viewers, the detached, impartial observers,
carrying the passports that permit us safe passage
into and out of these unearthly zones,
and not, by any means, the internees,
those who have been granted, against their will
and without their asking (though Dante's Virgil
would have disagreed, insisting that they did,
in effect, ask for this, that they did indeed will it)
permanent residence status—or whether,
in fact, we read it in some other way,
as, for example, presenting these
three states of being as being suspended

before us all at once, as if,
at any moment, we might slip partially
or even completely into any one of them,
or, for that matter, as if at any moment,
an elemental intrusion from hell or paradise
might erupt, without warning, into our lives—
so that the story is not a tale of causation
(sin leads to hell, light to darkness, delight
to damnation) but rather a manner of grasping
the complexity of our existence, how things
that are opposite, if they do not attract,
at the very least coexist, taking place
in one and the same moment, the disparate
constituents of human life that do not,
as one might have expected, when brought into contact,
annihilate one another, but instead,
by the very force of their contrast, heighten
and strengthen each other. What, other than evil,
could make virtue shine so bright? What, other than
purity and naïve hope, could entice
corruption and despair into bursting forth
to appear so nakedly as what they are?

Because order matters, yes; but our lives
are not orderly. And art, precisely
because it is, feels at times like a mere
detached imitation, yet can also feel
as if it were more like life than life
itself. Which is why, one assumes, we are drawn,
again and again, to the place where the picture
hangs, to stand in its presence, as if
it were only in those moments that we lived.

But we come from elsewhere, and we go elsewhere
when we are done with our looking. That they
are *earthly* delights, indeed, reminds us

that Dante's *Commedia*, too, begins
not in hell but on earth: that famous dark wood,
not a garden of delights, not at all, but a kind
of garden nevertheless, and that
an arrival in Paradise might well take
the form, as in that remarkable final
shot of Tarkovsky's *Solaris*, of
a return to Earth, a real Earth or
a reconstructed Earth, an imagined
garden or a painted garden, or simply
the garden where you were born. The leafy
globe, perhaps, that we see when the triptych
is closed. It is the earth that is ours,
and Dante's cosmic love, though it moves
the stars that track their paths through their skies,
is a leafy thing, a fleshly thing,
a thing of the soil, a thing that demands
to be lived out on this surface, on the face
of this terrestrial sphere, this local
unheavenly orb, this, our planet,
our neighborhood, if, that is
to say, it is to be lived at all.