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Sometimes

1.

*Something came up
out of the dark.
It wasn't anything I had ever seen before.
It wasn't an animal
or a flower,
unless it was both.
Something came up out of the water,
a head the size of a cat
but muddy and without ears.
I don't know what God is.
I don't know what death is.
But I believe they have between them
some fervent and necessary arrangement.*

2.

*Sometime
melancholy leaves me breathless...*

3.

*Water from the heavens! Electricity from the source!
Both of them mad to create something!
The lighting brighter than any flower.
The thunder without a drowsy bone in its body.*

4.

*Instructions for living a life:
Pay attention.
Be astonished.
Tell about it.*

5.

*Two or three times in my life I discovered love.
Each time it seemed to solve everything.
Each time it solved a great many things
but not everything.
Yet left me as grateful as if it had indeed, and
thoroughly, solved everything.*

6.

*God, rest in my heart
and fortify me,
take away my hunger for answers,
let the hours play upon my body*

*like the hands of my beloved.
Let the cathead appear again—
the smallest of your mysteries,
some wild cousin of my own blood probably—
some cousin of my own wild blood probably,
in the black dinner-bowl of the pond.*

7.

*Death waits for me, I know it, around
one corner or another.
This doesn't amuse me.
Neither does it frighten me.
After the rain, I went back into the field of sunflowers.
It was cool, and I was anything but drowsy.
I walked slowly, and listened
to the crazy roots, in the drenched earth, laughing and growing.*

Storage

*when i moved from one house to another
there were many things i had no room
for. what does one do? i rented a storage
space. and filled it. years passed.
occasionally i went there and looked in,
but nothing happened, not a single
twinge of the heart.
as i grew older the things i cared
about grew fewer, but were more
important. so one day i undid the lock
and called the trash man. he took
everything.
i felt like the little donkey when
his burden is finally lifted. things!
burn them, burn them! make a beautiful
fire! more room in your heart for love,
for the trees! for the birds who own
nothing -- the reason they can fly.*

Praying

*It doesn't have to be
the blue iris, it could be
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few
small stones; just
pay attention, then patch
a few words together and don't try
to make them elaborate, this isn't
a contest but the doorway*

*into thanks, and a silence in which
another voice may speak.*

The Summer Day

*Who made this world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean -
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down -
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?*

Wild Geese

*You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
For a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again.
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting --
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.*

Wild, Wild

*This is what love is:
The dry rose bush the gardener, in his pruning, missed
Suddenly bursts into bloom.
A madness of delight; an obsession.
A holy gift, certainly,
But often, alas, improbable.
Why couldn't Romeo have settled for someone else?
Why couldn't Tristan and Isolde have refused
The shining cup
Which would have left peaceful the whole kingdom?
Wild sings the bird of the heart in the forests
Of our lives.
Over and over Faust, standing in the garden, doesn't know
Anything that's going to happen, he only sees
The face of Marguerite, which is irresistible.
And wild, wild sings the bird.*

In Blackwater Woods

*Look, the trees are turning their own bodies into pillars of light,
are giving off the rich fragrance of cinnamon and fulfillment,
the long tapers of cattails are bursting and floating away over the blue shoulders of the ponds,
and every pond, no matter what its name is, is nameless now.
Every year everything I have ever learned in my lifetime leads back to this: the fires
and the black river of loss whose other side is salvation,
whose meaning none of us will ever know.
To live in this world you must be able to do three things:
to love what is mortal;
to hold it against your bones knowing your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes to let it go, to let it go.*

The Journey

*One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began,
though the voices around you
kept shouting
their bad advice—
though the whole house
began to tremble
and you felt the old tug
at your ankles.
"Mend my life!"
each voice cried.
But you didn't stop.*

*You knew what you had to do,
though the wind pried
with its stiff fingers
at the very foundations,
though their melancholy
was terrible.
It was already late
enough, and a wild night,
and the road full of fallen
branches and stones.
But little by little,
as you left their voices behind,
the stars began to burn
through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice
which you slowly
recognized as your own,
that kept you company
as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world,
determined to do
the only thing you could do—
determined to save
the only life you could save.*

Logos

*Why worry about the loaves and fishes?
If you say the right words, the wine expands.
If you say them with love
and the felt ferocity of that love
and the felt necessity of that love,
the fish explode into many.
Imagine him, speaking,
and don't worry about what is reality,
or what is plain, or what is mysterious.
If you were there, it was all those things.
If you can imagine it, it is all those things.
Eat, drink, be happy.
Accept the miracle.
Accept, too, each spoken word
spoken with love.*

Where Does the Temple Being, Where Does It End?

*There are things you can't reach. But
you can reach out to them, and all day long.*

The wind, the bird flying away. The idea of God.

And it can keep you as busy as anything else, and happier.

*The snake slides away; the fish jumps, like a little lily,
out of the water and back in; the goldfinches sing
from the unreachable top of the tree.*

I look; morning to night I am never done with looking.

*Looking I mean not just standing around, but standing around
as though with your arms open.*

*And thinking: maybe something will come, some
shining coil of wind,
or a few leaves from any old tree—
they are all in this too.*

*And now I will tell you the truth.
Everything in the world
comes.*

At least, closer.

And, cordially.

*Like the nibbling, tinsel-eyed fish; the unlooping snake.
Like goldfinches, little dolls of goldfluttering around the corner of the sky*

of God, the blue air.

Tecumseh

*I went down not long ago
to the Mad River, under the willows
I knelt and drank from that crumpled flow, call it
what madness you will, there's a sickness
worse than the risk of death and that's
forgetting what we should never forget.
Tecumseh lived here.
The wounds of the past
are ignored, but hang on...
Sometimes
I would like to paint my body red and go out into
the glittering snow*

to die.
His name meant Shooting Star.
From Mad River country north to the border
he gathered the tribes
and armed them one more time. He vowed
to keep Ohio and it took him
over twenty years to fail...
his body could not be found.
It was never found...
if we ever meet him, we'll know it,
he will still be
so angry.

Some Questions You Might Ask

*Is the soul solid, like iron?
Or is it tender and breakable, like
the wings of a moth in the beak of the owl?
Who has it, and who doesn't?
I keep looking around me.
The face of the moose is as sad
as the face of Jesus.
The swan opens her white wings slowly.
In the fall, the black bear carries leaves into the darkness.
One question leads to another.
Does it have a shape? Like an iceberg?
Like the eye of a hummingbird?
Does it have one lung, like the snake and the scallop?
Why should I have it, and not the anteater
who loves her children?
Why should I have it, and not the camel?
Come to think of it, what about the maple trees?
What about the blue iris?
What about all the little stones, sitting alone in the moonlight?
What about roses, and lemons, and their shining leaves?
What about the grass?*

The Swan

Did you too see it, drifting, all night, on the black river?
Did you see it in the morning, rising into the silvery air –
An armful of white blossoms,
A perfect commotion of silk and linen as it leaned
into the bondage of its wings; a snowbank, a bank of lilies,
Biting the air with its black beak?
Did you hear it, fluting and whistling
A shrill dark music – like the rain pelting the trees – like a waterfall

Knifing down the black ledges?
And did you see it, finally, just under the clouds –
A white cross Streaming across the sky, its feet
Like black leaves, its wings Like the stretching light of the river?
And did you feel it, in your heart, how it pertained to everything?
And have you too finally figured out what beauty is for?
And have you changed your life?

Mindful

*Every day I see or hear something that more or less
kills me with delight, that leaves me like a needle
in the haystack of light. It was what I was born for - to look, to listen,
to lose myself inside this soft world - to instruct myself over and over
in joy, and acclamation. Nor am I talking about the exceptional,
the fearful, the dreadful, the very extravagant - but of the ordinary, the common, the very
drab,
the daily presentations. Oh, good scholar, I say to myself, how can you help
but grow wise with such teachings as these - the untrimmable light
of the world, the ocean's shine, the prayers that are made out of grass?*

This Morning

*This morning the redbirds' eggs
have hatched and already the chicks
are chirping for food. They don't
know where it's coming from, they
just keep shouting, "More! More!"
As to anything else, they haven't
had a single thought. Their eyes
haven't yet opened, they know nothing
about the sky that's waiting. Or
the thousands, the millions of trees.
They don't even know they have wings.
And just like that, like a simple
neighborhood event, a miracle is
taking place.*

To Begin With, the Sweet Grass

*Will the hungry ox stand in the field and not eat
of the sweet grass?
Will the owl bite off its own wings?
Will the lark forget to lift its body in the air or
forget to sing?
Will the rivers run upstream?*

*Behold, I say - behold
the reliability and the finery and the teachings
of this gritty earth gift.*

2.

*Eat bread and understand comfort.
Drink water, and understand delight.
Visit the garden where the scarlet trumpets
are opening their bodies for the hummingbirds
who are drinking the sweetness, who are
thrillingly gluttonous.*

*For one thing leads to another.
Soon you will notice how stones shine underfoot.
Eventually tides will be the only calendar you believe in.*

*And someone's face, whom you love, will be as a star
both intimate and ultimate,
and you will be both heart-shaken and respectful.
And you will hear the air itself, like a beloved, whisper:
oh, let me, for a while longer, enter the two
beautiful bodies of your lungs....*

4.

*Someday I am going to ask my friend Paulus,
The dancer, the potter,
To make me a begging bowl
Which I believe
My soul needs.*

*And if I come to you,
To the door of your comfortable house
With unwashed clothes and unclean fingernails,
Will you put something into it?*

*I would like to take this chance.
I would like to give you this chance.*

5.

*We do one thing or another; we stay the same, or we change.
Congratulations, if
You have changed.*

6.

*Let me ask you this.
Do you also think that beauty exists for some fabulous reason?*

*And if you have not been enchanted by this adventure-
Your life-
What would do for you?*

7.

*What I loved in the beginning, I think, was mostly myself.
Never mind that I had to, since somebody had to.
That was many years ago.
Since then I have gone out from my confinements,
through with difficulty.
I mean the ones that thought to rule my heart.
I cast them out, I put them on the mush pile.
They will be nourishment somehow (everything is nourishment
somehow or another).
And I have become the child of the clouds, and of hope.
I have become the friend of the enemy, whoever that is.
I have become older and, cherishing what I have learned,
I have become younger.*

*And what do I risk to tell you this, which is all I know?
Love yourself. Then forget it. Then, love the world.*

The Poet Thinks about the Donkey

*On the outskirts of Jerusalem
the donkey waited.
Not especially brave, or filled with understanding,
he stood and waited.*

*How horses, turned out into the meadow,
leap with delight!
How doves, released from their cages,
clatter away, splashed with sunlight.*

*But the donkey, tied to a tree as usual, waited.
Then he let himself be led away.
Then he let the stranger mount.*

*Never had he seen such crowds!
And I wonder if he at all imagined what was to happen.
Still, he was what he had always been: small, dark, obedient.*

*I hope, finally, he felt brave.
I hope, finally, he loved the man who rode so lightly upon him,
as he lifted one dusty hoof and stepped, as he had to, forward.*

The Chat

*I wish
I were
the yellow chat
down in the thickets
who sings all night,
throwing
into the air
praises
and pandhandles,
plains,
in curly phrases,
half-rhymes,
free verse too,
with head-dipping
and wing-wringing,
with soft breast
rising into the air-
meek and sleek,
broadcasting,
with no time out
for pillow-rest,
everything-
pathos,
thanks-
Oh, Lord,
what a lesson
you send me
as I stand
listening
to your rattling, swamp-loving chat
singing
of his simple, leafy life-
how I would like to sing to you
all night
in the dark
just like that.*

Just Lying on the Grass at Blackwater

*I think sometimes of the possible glamour of death -
that it might be wonderful to be
lost and happy inside the green grass -
or to be the green grass! -
or, maybe the pink rose, or the blue iris,*

*or the affable daisy, or the twirled vine
looping its way skyward – that I might be perfectly peaceful
to be the shining lake, or the hurrying, athletic river,
or the dark shoulders of the trees
where the thrush each evening weeps himself into an ecstasy.
I lie down in the fields of goldenrod, and everlasting.
Who could find me?
My thoughts simplify. I have not done a thousand things
or a hundred things but, perhaps, a few.
As for wondering about answers that are not available except
in books, though all my childhood I was sent there
to find them, I have learned
to leave all that behind
as in summer I take off my shoes and my socks,
my jacket, my hat, and go on
happier, through the fields. The little sparrow
with the pink beak
calls out, over and over, so simply – not to me
but to the whole world. All afternoon
I grow wiser, listening to him,
soft, small, nameless fellow at the top of some weed,
enjoying his life. If you can sing, do it. If not,
even silence can feel, to the world, like happiness,
like praise,
from the pool of shade you have found beneath the everlasting.*

Singapore

*In Singapore, in the airport,
a darkness was ripped from my eyes.
In the women's restroom, one compartment stood open.
A woman knelt there, washing something
in the white bowl.
Disgust argued in my stomach...
A poem should always have birds in it...
Rivers are pleasant, and of course trees...
A person wants to stand in a happy place, in a poem.
When the woman turned I could not answer her face.
Her beauty and her embarrassment struggled together, and
neither could win...
Yes, a person wants to stand in a happy place, in a poem.
But first we must watch her as shares down at her labor,
which is dull enough...
She does not work slowly, nor quickly, but like a river.
Her dark hair is like the wing of a bird.
I don't doubt for a moment that she loves her life*

*And I want her to rise up from the crust and the slop
and fly down to the river.
This probably won't happen.
But maybe it will.
If the world were only pain and logic, who would want it?
Of course, it isn't.
Neither do I mean anything miraculous, but only
the light that can shine out of a life. I mean
the way she unfolded and refolded the blue cloth,
the way her smile was only for my sake: I mean
the way this poem is filled with trees, and birds.*

Gethsemane

*The grass never sleeps.
Or the roses.
Nor does the lily have a secret eye that shuts until morning.*

Jesus said, wait with me. But the disciples slept.

*The cricket has such splendid fringe on its feet,
and it sings, have you noticed, with its whole body,
and heaven knows if it ever sleeps.*

*Jesus said, wait with me. And maybe the stars did, maybe
the wind wound itself into a silver tree, and didn't move,
maybe
the lake far away, where once he walked as on a
blue pavement,
lay still and waited, wild awake.*

*Oh the dear bodies, slumped and eye-shut, that could not
keep that vigil, how they must have wept,
so utterly human, knowing this too
must be a part of the story.*

Lead

*Here is a story
to break your heart.
Are you willing?
This winter
the loons came to our harbor
and died, one by one,
of nothing we could see.
A friend told me
of one on the shore*

*that lifted its head and opened
the elegant beak and cried out
in the long, sweet savoring of its life
which, if you have heard it,
you know is a sacred thing,
and for which, if you have not heard it,
you had better hurry to where
they still sing.*

*And, believe me, tell no one
just where that is.*

*The next morning
this loon, speckled
and iridescent and with a plan
to fly home*

*to some hidden lake,
was dead on the shore.*

*I tell you this
to break your heart,
by which I mean only
that it break open and never close again
to the rest of the world.*

Poppies

*The poppies send up their
orange flares; swaying
in the wind, their congregations
are a levitation
of bright dust, of thin
and lacy leaves.*

*There isn't a place
in this world that doesn't
sooner or later drown
in the indigos of darkness,
but now, for a while,
the roughage
shines like a miracle
as it floats above everything
with its yellow hair.*

*Of course nothing stops the cold,
black, curved blade
from hooking forward—
of course
loss is the great lesson.*

*But I also say this: that light
is an invitation*

*to happiness,
and that happiness,
when it's done right,
is a kind of holiness,
palpable and redemptive.
Inside the bright fields,
touched by their rough and spongy gold,
I am washed and washed
in the river
of earthly delight—
and what are you going to do—
what can you do
about it—
deep, blue night?*

Morning Poem

Every morning the world is created.

*Under the orange sticks of the sun the heaped ashes of the night turn into leaves again
And fasten themselves to the high branches— and the ponds appear like black cloth on which
are painted islands of summer lilies.*

*If it is your nature to be happy you will swim away along the soft trails for hours, your
imagination alighting everywhere.
And if your spirit carries within it the thorn that is heavier than lead— if it's all you can do to
keep on trudging—*

*There is still somewhere deep within you a beast shouting that the earth is exactly what it
wanted—
Each pond with its blazing lilies is a prayer heard and answered lavishly, every morning,*

Whether or not you have ever dared to be happy, whether or not you have ever dared to pray.

Swan

*Did you too see it, drifting, all night on the black river?
Did you see in it the morning, rising into the silvery air,
an armful of white blossoms,
a perfect commotion of silk and linen as it leaned
into the bondage of its wings: a snowbank, a bank of lilies,
biting the air with its black beak?....*

*And did you feel it, in your heart, how it pertained to everything?
And have you too finally figured out what beauty is for?
And have you changed your life?*