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and others first published at that time

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I am sitting thinking chewing
a rancid morsel of dismay
when she comes in
and it is hard not to sniff at her
trace her other lovers' scents
maul her memories
But they would not die, and it
is better to accept her
not even desiring
understanding: for fear whispers
falsetto in all hidingholes,
comparison makes rodents
of us all. Quivering,angry
or dishonestly submissive,
we bite our own tails

outside the squared city, my walls
herds of unladen lorries wait
to race into new lands.
my hopes are like jammed trafficlights.

small floods appal a rotting branch.
to feed the new the spring devours
what winter left.

the game's different.
checked kings sacrifice themselves to pawns.

yet here i sit between the come & gone
defending both their pieces, feeding off memories,
& though the sweetness still remains
corpse-like it catches in the throat.

on my own i must raise this siege
since i sit at both sides of the board.
to wait with the spring will be to wait till autumn.

better to leave the board, the citadel
get in the first lorry drive off
risk the crash

under the cathedral

he left the house, shuddering with slammed doors,
set off down the street, gloriously alone

and found the consul in one of his various disguises
not disagreeable but drunk
his eyes bulging as if they still faced
the stiletto sun of quauhnahuac

leaning a little too carefully upon the railings
staring with the raging gentleness of those who have
nobody them with, who are already set separate from world
trapped in the circle of themselves
themselves all worlds

staring
at the chalked statement, yellow on the wall,

more chill
than any biblical command,
more warm than any hope of heaven;

it is not possible to live without love

in the forecourt the gravel turns
into paved roads and deserts
a small white stone into a mosque
a grey pebble to a peasant's hut

but then as sudden as the sun there is

this broken twig, loitering
at the edge of the imagined road
too big to be ignored, too small
to be no part of the new landscape

and you sit
and you think what can that be
and no imagination
can make it anymore than a twig

and all the huts and mosques and roads collapse
and all just are what they were and are
stones gravel pebbles

so smooth so uneven
so amazing in the sunlight

and indeed every imagination
should have a twig like this

Tullimet 1973

A grey day. Roaring winds.
The snow has hardly thawed.
A calm voice from Aberdeen suggests
breeding more deer for sunday dinner.
Stench of the scorched whitestone
reek of the burnt rooftree.

Behind this house for forty miles
sheep huddle in razed villages
and graze moorgrass where gardens were,
while to the south for fifteen miles
the deer and grouse alone may make
a home within the fences and the wire.

How do lands come to this: prison farms
where wealthy warders breed whatever stock,
human, sheep, game, trees, will raise most profit,
then slaughter till all's gone to sustain their crude economy?

I go outside choking. A great white light
rises from Strathbran, blinding out the hills,
pinpointing each sheep and deer and tree and me.
World so sharp. so alive.
Trapped, awaiting consumption

I am drinking tea
with the woman in the house
across the road
and wishing I knew her better

or should I say
I and the woman in the house
across the road

are drinking tea at the same time
sitting at our respective tables
looking at each other
across the road,

which is wide and full of rain.

In Nottingham [*for Chas*]

dusk discourages inaction. instead
there is a grim chill swirling the
homegoers, fragments
of burnt paper, drifting without
volition up the flues of buses,
listless nervous morbid among
the ashes of this fumey evening

sad clowns dominate the junction
slightly contorted their masks
more than a joke

not quite despair, and yet we still
convince ourselves that we have
purpose direction even destination
within our fluttering control

none perhaps more foolishly than me

In this tangled world who knows what causes anything,
why there are pigeons, why when we meet
it's in a bar and Tuesday,
why we ever met, why we have shape at all

Some said that seven lame men keep the world
intact, and that great minds make the roses grow,
maybe a blackened tree is holding the city up
and one worm coiled in its roots supports our love,

and something, some stray dog perhaps,
gives me life, experience ... and I wonder what
I am keeping in existence without knowing it.

The questions come and I cannot answer
which is as well, for if I could we both and maybe
everything would find its reason
and could we face that? But curiosity ...

the amazon expeditions

a long trail, well marked
by cairns of toothwhite bones

former explorers who died devoured
as usual, by others or themselves

& when the heaps are ended, then
the next must be your own

maybe we are always here & nothing was ever done
or we exist only for moments while universes collide

but how should this concern us, flickering

between streetlight & shadow
the party and the vomiting

who are creating our worlds
out of our every pause, each

small collision of hand or eye,

& whose every small decision
fixes us and that moment in time

St. Augustine's Bride

for ten centuries he has encouraged her
to sit this way, hands folded
by the lily pool; her white gown
freezing the light, her face demure,
downcast: she has been taught
to mask the fever of her eyes.

around her feet gross lies have gathered,
tales of love's suffering, of joy
in pain, how love deepens through obstacles,
of pride in lack of consummation.

the saint sits by her, his fingers twitch
towards his crotch, his eyes
sneak this way that way heavenwards,
each fibre in his body strives
towards that which he still denies.

till finally she sets
her embroidery aside:
i have been cheated and
we are not talking of the same thing
you and i
she says

such strange trees
glorious & deformed
our fantasies sprout
in cones & lived flowers

but though these can
be snapped or wither
no heavy foot or hand
can break our dreams

which are not found in branch or root
but everywhere like
dew or rain unstoppable

they seek their sea

a complex solution

from the grove at colonus
what sight threw the kings hand
across his eyes when the dread mothers
received their prodigal?

a naked old man dead on grass

a seeing
of that which governs without
authority or claim,
of the paths of the labyrinth
and the thread he must follow
in amaze and humility

before he
as any
fated wanderer
finds home

small fairy story

& after 5 years in the cave
he managed to delight
the dwarf sat on his shoulder
sufficiently to allow
the small hole to be enlarged

& in this way he crawled
through all the cloudy avalanche
finally pushing aside
the last stone & the dwarf
emerging

on the overgrown planet:
nervous of spring
he takes the coins & candle, goes
in any direction, stepping over

the sleeping forms
of guardian angels
& other such hustlers

Opportunity

shrivelled by thirst & here
a hairy fat
cow whose udder's alarmingly full

at moments such as this who fears
an absence of technique must leave
his bloated desire to distantly ruminate

while the fearless unthinking can put
head between legs & cheerfully
suck

satisfying myself spent
cold days and nights away
from the rubberplant

what can cherish so
many things at once ?

i only help that which
never leaves it - such
a careless servant

[and part-time too]

wet afternoon

this afternoon i wear rubber boots
protection from rising floods outside
and electric surgings here within.
cats ease across the nervous
carpet to be stroked, friends that take
your time and hands away from you

out in a brainstorm, under trees
in waterfall, i find the mangled corpse
of my earlier thoughts surrounded

by policemen. their faces are severe
they are maybe the faces of my friends

they also say i murdered him. there
is a rubberboot mark in his mouth.

hanged man in a dripping tree
stares upward from a puddle
catching rain in upturned palms
strangely empty rubber strongholds

a story

There was a street - small houses squeezed together
on a stony road staggering up a hillside.

And in the street lived an old couple:
the woman marked by grey hair bearding her chin,
sturdy, full-faced, a black mole on her cheek -
if a child said hello to her, his friends
would jeer - ugly, ugly - you know how children are.
But there was a thing that upset all the street,
the clacking tongues, the eyes behind the curtains,,

the houses had no inside loos, and naturally
the old kept a night bucket to save them cold dark journeys,
but in the morning - this was her great sin,
instead of carrying it out the back, she'd haul
her bucket out the front, lift up the grid
and pour its contents down the public drain.
In a street like that, nothing can be done
early enough to avoid notice. She was despised.

But, one day, she didn't appear. No metal bucket clanging, slop-
sloshing,
no crash as the grid fell back. Not that day, or the next, or the next.
The curtains quivered with a different apprehension. And on the
third day,
the women at their work-talk, their doorstep scrubbing, sent a
young lad
legging over the backwall, shinning up a drainpipe,
in at a window. And when he opened the front door
his face showed triumph mixed with fright - so they found the
couple lying,
fully dressed, in bed; laid out, it seemed, and the house a cess of
well-aged smells

A story/2

a mess of leavings downstairs, the brimful bucket on the landing,
the bedroom
stale and sicksweet -- but they weren't dead, and soon
were in the hospital, fussed over, fed. The women
now came from their houses with mops, buckets, brushes.

They cleaned all day, the windows open, shouting to each other,
shooing the curious children, the loitering men, joking, cleaning,
cleaning till the house had their approval, felt, smelt and looked
just as it should.

Then they went home. But every other day
one or other would come to flick a duster, let air in, keep it right.
When the old returned -- it turned out that they'd been dying
of forgetfulness mixed with hunger and old age --
a sense of satisfaction was in the street, a sense of their own value,
dignity -- not smug, not spoken, but there.

The next morning, at first curtain tweak,
there she was again, the old woman,
slopping her bucket out the front.
And all those same neighbours cracked about her,
turned their heads, despised her once again.

The story ends there. No moral. What it says
about ourselves is what we always knew.

A peasant tale perhaps, Italian villagers, South American?
No. This was Peter's story. From Liverpool.

And the street has been pulled down.

worknotes.

1.

work that is work
is not the work
the work is play

2.

when you cannot make it sing
in you or move in dance,

whose funeral are you walking to
what urges on your hand?

that you are paid makes you slave
to everything you then can buy

for every shop's the companies' store
when the companies rule the land.

3.

people can screw dead bodies
said the crazy lady
but
they never feed them

so much
for a society of useable people
doing tasks they cannot resist.

4.

what hands are these making baskets of broken reeds
or striving to build high with slime?
whose minds are these so far now from the ground
their owners build where none will even enter ?

who moves a cog or turns a wheel
that makes desires not basic needs

worknotes. 2

shoves on the belt of debris & decay;
and he who strikes to gain more of this crap
instead of asking for his rights
control, a voice, responsibility
is equally pushing it & all our corpses.
if your labour is worthless, what good
is any payment, however large, that merely
maintains you & that labour in existence ?

already most that's made's for waste
ragged scrap in bloated mud:
two centuries of economic diarrhoea
the labourer did the easy task,
the paid job alone, & built the cesspit
that he & his now drown in.

& shall we, freer than our forefathers,
work on to selfish ends among
the rubble that our ends end in,
narrow, fearful, nervously denying
our proper needs, our right for each
to be responsible for all ?

& shall we sacrifice the future to ourselves
as in a long nights history of manunkind
or curb our swollen appetites in face
of endless unborn hungers ?

5.
the strong man retires
despite his likings
this the weak man
cannot aspire to

here is the work. how hard do you find it ?

Lauds of Washing Up

All praise to thee Washer who hath delivered us from
the slime and smell of that stagnant pool wherein we thought
to dwell forever

All praise to thee Washer who hath delivered us
from large and dismal places the which were covered in decay
of uneaten food and grease and ash

and who hath set us up in our just and proper order
each according to his nature, shining bright
upon the clean but boring kitchen shelves

All praise to thee Washer and also to the Trinity
the Sink, the Water and the Washing-up Liquid
by whose help is our salvation gained

All praise to thee Washer
who when our life is done
and we are cracked and broken by careless chance
wilt treat us as thine own
even taking us up and placing us within a casket,
in which on strong shoulders we are conveyed and consigned
into the earth from which we came

for as long as i can remember - she said -
i've known what i wanted: a special friend,
not a cuddly toy, not a furry pet,
not make-believe whispers from my pillow -
i've had all these, they were only substitutes,

and other children? i had many friends,
we played and laughed and learned together
but were too much the same, we mirrored each other,
i trusted them no more than i did myself.

at night i'd stand at the window, staring out
at the unseen roads my friend might travel,
at cloudships sailing from the moon,
at harbour-lights of distant stars -

still now, in old age, i wait, i hover
between great hope and a final despair

Plant Bakery

Where they turn the dough
is cool, the long blue windows
let a shaded summer find its mirror
in the gleaming giant bowls

and where you pat and plait the dough
and throw it in the conveyed tins
is no worse than a tropic hut
in a wheatdust desert under metal crags

but where you grease the oven tins
caged with an oilcloth and the turning stack
is the black back of a blistered beast
at whose mouth, ferment fetid, breath
blasts four times hotter than your heart
till lungs brain hands are swollen as the bread
and all your fingers, under flapping cloths,
asleep to pain, are burnt to senselessness:

and as the tins are emptied, and the tower
of loaves rises up the cooler to the town,
you race relentless ranks whose turn is done
for one clear space to run the fifteen feet

to fill a much-used plastic cup
with acrid lime-juice from a metal urn;
to taste, in this strange world of food
too hot, too fresh, too everywhere to eat,
of alien climate and thankless machines,
light years from those long light-blue dreams,
something more human than your sweat or shouts:
a small, hard-won, sour satisfaction and relief.

the ministers tale.

who first we meet knelt by his bed
a guest in this house lost among dark trees
praying for a swift release from flesh
weakened by lavish hospitalities

smothered by walls and blankets
he staggers down & out into the night,

circles the house in flapping pyjamas
slithers in what is it, falls into slime, wet
knees in roots crying to old gods and mothers.

put on his dignity by a sudden moon
he stumbles back to shelter to find
the door closed the bridegroom deep asleep

though in pitiful condition and lampless
he was not humble enough to knock & dragged
his body once more round the walls in search of openings

a small window not too high seems the only entrance
corpulent but desperate he girds his loins
& heaves & squeezes through - it is a small room, the door

is locked, he has no strength to repass the window, his torn
pyjamas hang sodden from his scratched & muddy flab he sinks
once more to the floor

& so we leave him awaiting morning's discovery
the day of judgement
communing with who knows what

past all possible prayers
his knees on the soft mat, his head
bent over the lavatory's bowl

holiday sport

As the players came out, everyone shouted,
yelled at each other, at the sellers of food,
waved their arms, cheered, jumped up and down -

what skilful tactics, rapid passes, lightning strikes -

How they urged on the reckless attack,
jeered as the defence crumbled - they got really excited -
they enjoyed being excited, for the feeling itself

much more than the game:
those small figures running desperately about,
so far away below their roaring pulsing stands.

And at the end, whether they laughed boastfully
or turned away with a grumble of disgust
was of no interest to the losers

or to the lion, tearing at them in the dust.

overtime

shovelling cement from the silo: a rainy saturday
half-built houses gape at a shapeless sky.

an aeroplane stumbles cursing through clumsy clouds
one dog patrols the unadopted road.

despite the rain, cement dust flares & floats
like conjourers smoke: again, despite the rain
each pitted shovelfull has to be heaved
into the mixer with sand that 's just as sodden

& shoreshiny gravel; & then with rain
churning inside my collar, i fetch the hose
to water the mix. cloudgrey powder coats
my front & boots, thin rain soaks through my back.

somewhere i know there are other men, one comes
sometimes to take a load; this forms a purpose, but

for now, lost in the rain on this half-made afternoon,
the straggly dog (coat flapping, paws solid grey) & i

stare at each other with a sideways bewilderment
at finding ourselves, here, in each others baffled eyes.

Dustmen

We count the days by shops and alleyways,
each bend and length is measured by our shouts,
and know the houses by the state of their backgates
the people by whatever they've cast out.

Close to the end of things we heave the reeking bins
from paving stone to shoulder with one rising turn
and with the harsh wry humour of gravediggers
we mock the maggots shaken from the metal urn.

In the maze of broken brick and antique slippery slabs
where wild potatoes flower and charred tins rust
like hunters we know creatures by their leavings
and view them more with interest than disgust.

Into the wagon's wrecking jaws I've crammed a three -
piece suite, a bedstead, a piano, a dead dog in two bits;
slummy goes into the sack, but for a modest fee
we'll crush anything to nothing and drop it in the pit.

And every week twenty more tons press on four collar bones:
what you throw out lightly falls heavily on us
who bear your past away and bury it; you who'll become
worn bones and spoiling meat, old clothes, handfuls of dust.