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THE IGNIS FATUUS

Twenty Poems

1983

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THE INTERLOPERS

Beneath inverted black jungle
of water hyacinth roots underweaving my hidden bayou,
my diver's lamp the only hold with my world,
I disturb a concert of stripes: hundreds
of inch-long fishes silver slanting right or left
as my hand directs. A king size mud cat
like Genghis Khan eyes me from the olive drab floor.
And overhead! My lost boat! Impounded
since last summer— clamped listing in a wet/dry vise,
sun-half of bulbous green vases feigning
innocence with flowers; night-half of fringe
and garland chain, propeller upholstered in velvet.
I rip away the slimy grip and feel
hairy stalactites creep closer, more determined.
than topside kudzu. The gasoline-fed screw might
thresh a yard before losing. A new spring army
of trees wades out to make a stockade.
Roman-helmeted herons patrol
the spreading perimeter above with lances.
Here, the mighty Khan rules, guarded by turtles.
And I, slave to light and lungs
must fight myself free.

A VASE OF PINK PLUM BLOSSOMS

The dull clay coil in my potter's hands
obeyed my fingers, my will,
but only casually.

The relinquished form lusted after light,
rearranged its gray molecules in sun,
reveled in its experience with fire.

Still an apprentice,
it drank deeply of earth's unguents
flowed over its flaws, then healed
and ripened in the last lap of hereditary heat.
Today it came into its own
first flowering
alloyed with pollinated sisters of the soil.

Convolutions of shapes and sounds
changed and flowed on a weft of black,
approaching, receding on a vector of velvet.
Green was a flavor and all other eyes a strong scent.
Motion was a prolonged spring, a dive
that never reached water, reversed upward at will.

Deeper was slow cryptic drumming,
a sudden sinewy flash of untame gilt and ebony
lancing through vines and scorched grass
dissolving into jungle dusk.

Another door. A sly stir in a chamber beyond.

A brink, a river noise, a rush of olive and indigo.

At my feet a beetle—

No, a scarab jewel!

And I returned to my place without crossing the Nile.

DIARY: BLACKBIRDS IN THE WHITE OAK

Morning at the upstairs window:

A ragged inkspill on diluted winter sun
splashing vellum clouds with exclamations
of leftover night. The accents all depart.
Zigzag in slow motion
a dark quill returns to twisted lines of calligraphy.
Knotted fingers writing my horizon,
aspiring to heaven,
lurch upward to await the twilight embrace
of winged coauthors who won//it.

Evening at the downstairs window:

Reunited on the whole moon's page,
birds and boughs compose
eloquent verses of silence
rising above
the voices in my kitchen spelling hurry and hunger.

Midnight:

Searching for a window in the dark volume,
low inside light finds a few sure strokes
underscoring my days like flying grackles
postscripting the sky,
making indelible certain lines
I'll always remember.

THE TRIHEDRONESS

You've seen her, a cunning child
looking lies from under lashes
long enough to blow in the wind.

You've seen her wanton eyes, wild and craving
as a falcon's, cool and hot as a cougar's,
waiting, always weighing,
never saying what they mean.

Then when the lids lower and raise
she is gone.

You've seen her fawn eyes transmit praise, hope,
blue-green layers of deep velvet understanding,
reflex lenses of compassion.

She who cared may be in the past;
she may come back tomorrow.

A blink. That fast.

Rapport returns to some vagrant sea.

You know I share the eyes with her and her.

One needs chaining below.

One should stay in the sun.

Both are prisoners of me.

AUTUMN IS NOT A SEASON...

but a gaudy arena where Summer/Winter
collide, where a played-out princess
falls to a truculent new monarch.

Thrown out of her palace overnight,
a moat of black chrysanthemums
surrounding it, ice bars at the windows,
gray shades drawn, smog stationed
on the perimeter to keep sun
from spying on the new regime,
an always ready fusillade of sleet
to keep subjects bowing,
Summer and her courtiers retreat
to regroup between Capricorn and Cancer.
And you who stay
must shed your ripe skin to blend with snow.

DRIED ARRANGEMENT

All those long cattails of longing
Sprung up in the soft marsh places
Of my inlands:
You picked them green and strung them upside down
To desiccate in your cellar
Along with laurels and strawflowers.
Now and then you show me the stiff brown bouquet
On your altar.
Hung up on the hard harsh places
Of my island,
I cling to rock ridges
That scar my eyes, and no longer
Weep among the weeds of my desire.

YOU ASK IF I'VE FORGOTTEN HIM

(While I'm Writing a French Rondeau About Storms)

I think of him when lightning splits
The pines astride this ridge then hits
The thicket wall still rolling fire.
Brush flares, rain hisses, makes a spire
Of smoke, a claim. It rarely quits
With that, but smolders in the pits
Of sticks and limbs till all my wits
Are stoked, so after I retire

I think of him.

In warming times each year this blitz
Re-scars my woods. I search for bits
Of green around charred wounds, then liar-
Like, hail life as something to desire.
All winter when my likeness fits,

I think of him.

LONG NIGHT HOMESIDE

I should learn to speak Japanese.

There may be something more to say.

You smoke too much in Kyoto
under the blue tile roof of your father.
Why did I leave? Why did you stay?

Out of cigarettes and choices.

Bored and huddled again on the prickly davenport
with my stewardess indigestion,
moon caught in the bared oak at my winter window.

Look. Two tiny stars, more alike than different,
impaled on California twigs
going unerringly to the heart of the matter..

Like haiku. Like shokwa. Needing no embellishment.
Impelled into jet-lag sleep on a wingless plane,
prodding grounded dreams while a jilted sun
hits bottom beyond the eastern arch, jarring
our paper fortunes near the gold pavillion,
jolting my moon free.

And at my periodic waking, the escapee
sheds no light on the fate
of lost pierced stars.

vs wellch 12
ba valise Z 10
20200 11 effigies
SOHO-SAC (SAC)

"WE MAY INHALE DESPAIR" ...Emily Dickinson

Her stark cubicle stays closed:
No green grows; only the walls
Are tender. Your prodding finger knows—
But found no entry,
No valve for compressed dark to drain.

Her cold crucible stays filled:
Refined slag, a purity of dross.
Your hopeful hands bruise
And now they ache with losing.
On your way home, gather for pressing
All the dying anodynes from her old garden.

TUTANKHAMUN: ONCE THERE WAS A BOY WHO LOVED TO WHISTLE

I saw your effigies catching light
posed on the threshold of blue and saffron,
paused in the old dreams from the head of Horus:
Morning renascence out of a Lotus—
Rolling across the arch of heaven on sun wheels—
Rafting under-earth rivers near shoals of Osiris,
wrapped in the shawls of Ptah.

Mortal eyes are splendored with your accessories,
a glut of gold and gods.
Gold is hard to forget.
And everywhere your face with your ankh-eyes
reflecting on your mirror world.
(You must have seen eyes when yours were closed,
always on you, looking full at you from anywhere,
a thousand replicas to fill your own.)

I saw you at the bowstring—hunter, warrior,
hero-murals of a king, a moral for your subjects,
foiled with lapis, carnelian, turquoise, ivory.
And in the end, failed by the vulturine wingspan
and flared serpent hood.

But back in the trailing edges of light,
beyond the artists' tales and the godsmiths' tolls,
before you changed your name, there was a smiling boy.
I saw him clearly through a tear in the papyrus,
rollicking barefoot on sands old when legends began:
You on an ungilded afternoon, learning how to whistle.

It is he behind the mask:
Amarna child with puckered mouth framing melodies
for songless birds, and turning Selket's head.
On moon-chilled desert I can hear him
softly behind the myth of death.

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN: LAST NOTES FROM DR. LOY'S RESEARCH LAB

The jar of reprieves is empty.

I have entered the complex process called death.

And my dear colleagues,

(who labeled me loner, prima donna, bastard)

despite all the times we've seen it, heard it, caused it,
we don't know much about it, do we?

If all my calculations are correct, my time will run out
near midnight. Till then I write my thoughts as a poem.

No more late hours to haul my heaviness up the ladder
to inhale library dust, mine the only fingerprints
claiming those heights since my old professor's.

No more mornings to peer throught the lighted shaft
probing the mindless obscenities feeding on healthy tissue,
nor afternoons to breed and stalk
the seething child-killers in glass cages—

Having defeated one of them, I am driven
to destroy others. But now my demon, destructive
as any virus, has come again with the fuel bill.

Unpaid, he is evicting me, shutting my shop.

No time left to isolate the mutant entity
I suspect lay each day beneath my eye
imitating enlarged innocence. My life's goal—
to expose it to world attack, to unlock doors, to stand

cont.

15.

at the portals and throw Messianic lightning
down the corridors of science. I would deal with the devil
to do it. But the dream, steeped in my sleepless adrenalin
and sulphuric tongue, must be delivered by someone else.

Almost midnight and the devil is disinterested.

I move away from my cells, from magnification and atomic rhythms
to culture my notebook in starlight.

What do I know of poetry? Yet the minutes allow
for nothing else. My molecules must restructure
to pass through ancient walls. Now is distilled sediment,
vitro-essence of failure, sealing my cloudy siphons
with unanswers. And no life
will be better for an eleventh hour poem.

The clock parts slow. Faint ticking. Heavy hands.

If only my other theories were as flawless
as this forte for human horology.

So much waste. Great strides to standstills.

Unless— that one! That wire-drawn pupil
who yesterday challenged the godsmith,
and turning to face me in the color of discovery,
ego-cut and laid open a moment, gave me a glimpse
of the bright burning edge of a demon I know.

To that damned and holy host, that one pupil,
I leave all I have—
the harsh shine of my keys—
and my only poem.

URBAN TAPESTRY

My oar dollops the water, ravels the reflection:
Bridges above me—giant warps over river,
lanes, tracks, the yarns of my childhood.
Creeks were my flosses, keeping my linings
from fraying, keeping me close
to the ways of catfish and beavers.
My origins were up there in a garden-patch bungalow
once atop that burrowing segment of superway—
Now the new tunnel, breechloaded with cars,
blasts a volley of steel across the bow of my small boat;
the half hoop of iron steadies the warning
appliqued against smoke sky.
An oil barge passes me, rocks me under the new span,
into its shadow, its roar, and I think
of the old hilly thunder prowling the pinestand,
unmuffled by rows of stacked people-bins
thwarting its rounds, teasing the lightning.
The barge slides down river like a disease-bearing snail
spinning its slimy wake near the bend
where my slow fever knows the bones of my old home lie.
The torn memories underweave the weft of the city
and I have run out of thread leading to freedom.

"LIKE A PANTHER IN THE GLOVE" ...Emily Dickinson
(For Another Emily)

"She was so thoughtful"— "So caring"—
her friends recited in psaltar tones.
"So sweet." "So sad." The ritual room
of shaking heads, furred sibilance of whispers
and carnation overkill thick enough to replace her bier.

My two pronged anger crackles and strikes:
Is this worth living as she did?
This maudlin mumbling mass?
Their sentiment a sentence!

At least such pious pap will never drip
from mobile mouths once mine is cosmetically closed!
They can never muster enough charity
to honey their tongues with me.

What right have they to my name on their warm lips!

Maybe she wasn't always wonderful. Or maybe
she ran on low amperage—never knowing how it is
to operate on your own hot crossed-circuitry,
splicing with scorched fingers
your own frayed smoking wires. Or maybe
she did it all and knew it well
under insulation of infinite grace.

In silence
I will make myself her monument.

BUTTERFLIES AND OTHER NOBLE THOUGHTS

What about those that wobble wet and wingless
on the torn flap of the chrysalis?

Born too early or late, too much, not enough.

Some do soar via bird beak and maw;

most fall unknown in the ragweeds
to be savaged by ants before flying as dust
in the jaws of prominent winds.

Do their glistening granules return
to incubate again in more fertile capsules
or must they wander wasted
forever looking for their missing colors
and a womb?

OLD WIVES THE TALES COME FROM

Crocheting string doilies, collars, antimacassars
no one wants, filling boxes, filling huge cotton prints,
sleeves sloping like tents, hooks unfastened
back of the neck, they string out
death in rocking chairs.

Daily they fatten to fill their final boxes,
paying out the slow twine, words no one hears,
advice no one needs, enlarging the old designs.

Back and forth they strain fifty-odd years of wifery
for a mite to impress the young ones
tightening against their webs and cardboard,
closing in with the last lid.

Frayed sheaths
used awhile by knife-voiced kin
who own everything in focus
outside the net of squares and wheels.

On humid suburban evenings, on some deserted
concrete patio, they group like toadstools,
picking at the threads of the days' patterns,
unraveling their mouths,
honing their only weapons.

DRAGON BOAT RIDE

(First Trip to China)

Unpracticed, oar-clumsy,
I knew better than to board a strange beast
in a strange land. Like an unridden stallion
wanting only to be rid of me, the wading creature
recoiled when unleashed, the red prow reared, bucked
forward
and spurted/after unpronounceable river.

Flaming comb and hackles trailing fragments of sun,
my unbroken mount ignored the faulty extensions
of my arms, aimed its head at the curve of rumpled sheen
and beyond! To a trough of froth and roar where its cries
of freedom from myth mingled with thunder of rock and water.
It shook with conviction, dipped its fangs
into spume once tasted, never forgotten, and filled itself
with all the magic it was heir to. Shivering its new song
into my numbness, swaying me with how
it knew the path around the boulders, it claimed me wholly,
no longer a rigid rueful barnacle on a foreign monster.
I, a pale spike on its spiny back, small muscle of its wings,
listed in harmony at the next bend where the river unclenched,
sailed shinily erect onto fast underrunning olive silk.
Content to chase whatever the secret current chased,
waving at the watching world,
waking the surface with our gilded tail.

21.

LAST UNCLE

In my dandelion days
I had five tall men
who swooped me and my dolls to their shoulders,
made me squeal deliciously.

In my frantic floribunda days
they began leaving
and I let them, without ever learning
of the last days of the Cavalry, without feeling
the bees' warmth against the glass lab cases, meeting
the queens, tasting the honey— without watching
the wet hands at the potter's wheel,
but reaching out my own each year for the fine bowls.

Once in my tearose days, it served me
to serve with the cognac
what I had heard without listening—how one had flown
the early U.S. Mail, had twice met Lindy,
had crashed in a swamp but saved his cargo.
A dry-box tidbit with only a faint aroma
of rich ragout. Because I was always
singing in the choir, collecting carnival glass,
photographing children in the garden.

cont.

And now in my pastel hollyhock days
there is one. My faded luggage is crammed
with empty pages as this jet eats space
from east to west,
and I wonder if he'll feel like talking.

THE IGNIS FATUUS

(3 sonnets)

Men marvel at her hair, corona bright,
The color of a winter waxing moon,
For she is strange and wild, a child of night
Who loves the swamps where twilight lurks at noon.

I followed her until she disappeared
Through sedge and slimy pools of brackish black;
Again she raced ahead where ravens jeered,
Past dying pines and past the diamondback.

She led me faster, luminous and lithe,
Through devil's darkness cleft with wisps of fire;
Behind me was another-- with a scythe--
But still I stalked her in footprintless mire.

Men say her eyes fluoresce with blue-green flame;
I must embrace her once, must know her name!

2.

Dream Dogging

Come searcher, learn the real will-o-the-wisp:
Come slog among mutated mud-grown trees,
And wait for wind's unwinding snake-tongue lisp
To wrinkle stagnant water near your knees.
Here latent night seduces natural time,
Though fronds of sun still penetrate tall ferns,
And copulating vines grim-greenly mime
Your myths and struggling gods, tight-lipped concerns.
Again illusion spreads elusive light—
A solar trick, not what you risked to see.
Stay, brace for total dark, and call it right:
Ignis fatuus, lore's torch, lure's apogee.
Hold fast to scientific explanation;
Pale viscous flares ignite mind's conflagration.

3.

Swamp Man

Old Jonas knew the country called "Big Deep"
That muddied up the middle of three states.
He served as guide for forty years to keep
Adventurers from snake bite/quicksand fates.
Then Jonas went off fishing. Two teams tried
To cross the marsh, explore the worst quagmire;
Some came back sick and hurt, the others died.
When Jonas heard, he vowed not to retire.
He knew the jack-o-lantern danced out there,
That freak dull blaze that made men lose their way.
He knew the legend, knew the truth to spare,
Enough to be the expert of his day.
Still, men pursued the foxfire, watched night burn
Till legend won— the guide did not return.