

When I Look Into Myself and Other Poems

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When I Look Into Myself

If people were tourists in their own country
they would be exotic, origin in dreams
of long drives over valleys of wheat and corn
or underground caves with coral cathedrals.
They would have an idiom rich with references
to kingdoms and royalties, religion
and brontosaurus, not to kitchen plumbing
to be repaired and the rally at the city hall.
You go away and bring home only the skin
Of your soul. Turn to anger if you want fame.
The emphasis you carry shapes your thought
and explodes the right words in the train station
or shopping mall. At night you fashion names
to go with your face. Eastern and hard-edge—
anger's has two holes for eyes and a gash for lips.
It hides behind a salutation to measure
strength and distance and, for the grand perspective,
behind love. Love conceals a mountain
as easily as a coloring book, putting
a sheen on the earth's surface so you can call it
ocean, but its talk testifies only
to the far side of neglect, oranges
left to sour in the sun or an abandoned
playground. Take away the aching heart,
the creaking knee bones, the dwindling paycheck
and you see love's skeleton. What holds it up
is its knowledge that it is believed,
that when you go from room to room searching
for your glasses it will give them to you.

Style

My mother smoked a cigarette with the lighted end
inside her mouth. I would watch her as she sat
on a stool doing the day's wash. She blew
a constant stream of smoke from the left side of her lips,
while her hands made soap suds billow and burst.
In our village not known for unusual things, it was
short of a miracle, the ember not dying
in her mouth and her palate not getting burned.
Style is the perfection of design, a habit
of usage that strives after elegance,

by which a language is renewed to bridge
desire and idiom, not to singe the text that pushes
into the but to clarify the warm edges.
Fine rhythm, no spittle adrift or, if a landscape,
no embellishments to spoil the perspective.
Nature rendered into a convincing craft makes
tension bloom from puffs and billows as in
a night song rain drips from branches over a lagoon.
It's not survival that is the leit motif, but a solitude

in working out a peace of mind or a pattern
of units above the dense imagery, so that
to suffer is to suffer wherever the place,
to love always has an ending. What is forever
but chance encounter with the sublime
while the here and now, immersed in soapy water,
is erasable, therefore improvable.

Mother did not have to choose. To be where one suffers
is to suffer everywhere, so to get somewhere
you must construct a fable of pain to soothe the ache.

Mother would spit the cigarette on the grass and start
a new one. The art is in getting used to it,
its essentials and fringes, its common moves
toward meaning that unclutters the mind,
fire's danger considered. When the breathing normalized
there might be a tune in her head on a frenzy
in her hands, every squeeze on clothes a validation
of her history, the ragtag ghost army of it,
the soap that stings the eyes and washes away the tears
of cold neglect. Style is not about freedom.

A Sudden Sadness

You have to make your soul work, there is no other way.
Being accountable is approaching the guard
and spreading before him the contents of your bag,
“These are all I have.” What the guard thinks is of no
consequence. You take your life in your own hand,
nobody moves you to do it but you do it.
Nothing is calculable at this point. The porter
may just be taking his cigarette
out of his pocket or giving a coded signal,
the customs inspector may be scratching his arm
or writing numbers on his skin. In a larger
context it may be at a government office
or a sports event—your possession identifies you—
suspicion counts like a snake but you wait,
for lover’s reprimand, a master’s praise,
a crow about to perch on a wooden fence.
Waiting is of no consequence, too,
it will not alter the outcome of the act.
In the South the railroad tracks pierce the horizon
to reach the postal boxes with the message,
“I am gone,” punctuate it with a cargo
of lotus seeds that nobody will eat.
Honor is another thing. Between the guard
and your bag, honor will fly the distance
to the barbed wire fence, huffing and puffing and saying
nothing. The mountain and river will run past it
like clockwork and it will not be caught. Nothing wrong
with your bag, it turns out. Five years in isolation

and there's nothing wrong with that. Democracy creeps
sidewise, one eye closed, your property
a tattered diary and a piece of soap
shaped like a duck. What good is remembering?
You throw the diary outside the window
as the taxi enters a dusty road. The duck
can amuse you later when the pain allows your jaw
to chew properly so much did they hit it
in the room. For now you won't smoke but in sad silence
muse on how in the jungle that you have left
your friends plan the world's order or on how in the house
you are headed for chirping birds will remind you
of your truncated heroism
and how history makes fools of us all.

The Guardian Angel

Still asleep at noon, my guardian angel curls up
In the sofa by the window which the sunlight
Pushes with colored fingers. It touches his face's
Dark skin, feels the cracks and scales surrounding his nose:
that is how I know he has been away last night,
the quick heaving of his chest, the cobwebs entangled
on his wings. How much did he bear this time
among the pirates of Somalia and the bakers
of Syria, bled, did he, with sorrow for Egyptian children
thrown in labor camps, their years
gone sour on the tree of life, oh how he must have grown
older than two hundred years, and when he was captured
and tied and placed before the firing squad,
did he regret the disguise he took—
a missionary priest—or he just cannot play
at anything untrue? But he fell gallantly
and later, when no one was looking, picked himself up
and flew to this room. Swoosh, swoosh, just like that,
over Tripoli and Stalingrad and Manila
with no coffee or a change of shirts—I know,
he tells me things about human faithlessness
and secret medicine, about defining
the very soul of evil in evil's own terms
and blowing up the global sadness into fiery
pieces of glass. He groans as he turns
on his side, adjusting his feathers to the new
position. What does his program include tomorrow—

a bridge to build in Sudan, a farm road in Brazil,
a church in China? From pain to purity
so many bodies to caress, he quick but not
quick enough for a large sanctification,
and no speech dead center through tropical storms,
battered and mumbled in the wind. Still he must nourish
his heart and hold his anger that would dislodge
the Pacific water and turn Asia upside-down,
invent somehow a language heaven would
understand when he argues his mysticism ...
A smile crosses his lips—financial logistics,
Medals, commendation letters, medicines,
Urinals, prefabricated houses,
And all the armies that can be squeezed into
nine ships—Oh, the ambition, the fear and trembling,
and I am sick and aged and alone,
wanting grace in darkness, and muscles for my bones.

A Review of History

Age indicates a grand design, an agitation
in the earth's crust or the invention of metal.
It is not growing into some expectation
to measure progress in the crop of rice
or the fattening cows. In the wood language,
what ages make the distance between chainsaw and log,
between table and lumber? An imagined smoothness
in the armrest well-sanded and sealed,
natural color stands out blinking in the light.
As when in Age of Flowers a man climbs the vines
to kiss his lady nestled with the swallows.
The moon glides by to give his face a glow.
There is a whisper in the trees. If a siege takes
the castles, if fifty horses run out
of the burnt gate into the wilderness,
if the lady escapes with the man, it is an age
well-lived. In the Age of Salt the butcher shops
cannot get salt from the sea. Fish jump dead
to the water's surface and meat spoils on the spit
for lack of flavoring. What to feed the soldiers
camping in the forest? This is probably when
the Deluge comes to regurgitate the bottom shoals
and start a new biology. The Age of Barter
is the beginning of wisdom, that one can add
or subtract any number of times and still come out
a winner. The equation explains the death
of lovers and the rise of the stock exchange
no matter how other factors of life may be
playing in the field. We trade for best value

and end up with an empty house—the furniture
and the room wanting to hide forever.
We barter a tyrant for a hero, a hero
for a democrat, a democrat
for a fish vendor, a fish vendor for a barber.
Or we barter for equal power, aiming
for plenitude, a monument for a bust,
or any self-image that can be polished.
The Age of Innocence comes briefly in between
protracted wars and famines. People retreat
to caves and higher grounds where they raise animals
and shape the beginning of new beliefs. In the end,
they regain a purity of thought
and a fascination for living. They have songs
and poems to celebrate the night. Not so
with the age of Metal when tar blackness pushes
the sunlight farther into the coast, no music lifts
the nation to surging joy, but the din
of clashing steel tears the sky and the sleeping sea.
Wrapped around the body or stamped with a ruling face,
metal shoves winners and losers into common graves,
their cry haunting the battlefield, “Bring us home!”
“Bring us home!” To rise again they will have to have
the directions and guidance of a sheep.