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ON CHRISTMAS DAY

The ache that not even lovers can lull away
from the space between their bodies at love,

and yet,
and yet is that which the suicide in his perfect plunging
entrusts himself to

is still far from Word

(And the Word
is still far from Flesh).

ON BEING POOR

And being poor means having to sing
when you would rather spew
skyscrapers from your mouth.

It means dancing when you would rather sow
yourself like a seed deep in cement.

(And when you look up
you have to say 'bread'
when all you see is stone.)

Being poor is being a lie.

Where is that golden age of poverty
when your poor roamed the earth
homeless like a dream that passes from sleep to sleep?
Where are the poor who can pray
"our daily bread" like no one else can?

LEFT IN EDEN

We have sisters who stayed
by that tree even after it was split, half knowledge
half life. We have brothers
who did not go forth and multiply
the sleeping salt, the dreaming bones,
the oil of sand into numbers they can breed
with other numbers to make more numbers
they can stuff into their pockets,
sweet siblings who do not roam the earth,
as if your word which is dunes
and grass and juts of land, all silences
that sing and proclaim, was home
they want to live in forever.

Industry is not their gospel and conquest
does not tempt them.

The world is infinite only when it is small,
a held thing loved that answers
from within a child,
a found kernel, a bright pebble.

And they do not turn water into wine
because they love water,
and listen to water, and find baptism
in all waters, they who do not curse
the barren tree but give thanks for it -
because everything is gift.

Look how they call each animal by name
and in turn name themselves after the animals,
the possum and the pheasant
the blackbird and the beaver,
and so carry the whole mountain
in their baskets and on their tongues.

But then you leave them, the ninety nine
who love you for the one who does not.
Look how they languish
though they stay true and wait by that tree
listening for the silence that grows fainter by the day.
Look how they lie down, at the end of their poverty

with the lion and the lamb
which languish also.

Maybe it's time for you to leave us, we
who trample what you have made, press them
into papers and coins, and subdue
what would rather love us, we who split
your tree in half,
so the knower must conquer the known,
the discoverer the discovered.

But we have brothers who wait for you,
languishing like the unspun lilies of the field,
sweet brothers and sisters who actually love you.

It is not too late for you.

[If I don't pray in words]

If I don't pray in words it is because
I want to think in trees, to be small
among my thoughts that stand upright.
I want to confess in flowers, in the jasmine
that don't close their eyes
and the lilies that don't spin.

I want to show you my hands,
the marks they bear of all
the fists they have clenched,
the straws they have grasped.
But look how they curl like paws in my pockets,
and remember being wings
when they rest lightly on other wings.

If I don't pray in words, it is because *I* want to be
that purse on your lips, some small berry
that keeps still in the vineyard of your text
to gather sweetness slowly between the pages until it is said.

I want to read your psalm in old men,
the broken who bend like cut tulips
lower and lower until their lips touch water
that flows freely to places no one has seen.
Let them stand for my submission,
when I bow or kneel or bless myself before your holy image.

And most of all, if I don't pray in words
it is because I want to pray in faces,
faces that light has lived in awhile,
and is now turning to evening,
faces that hide, and faces
that bang their heads against the wall
until you start existing, in equal anguish
on the other side of that despair.

I have faith
these are the faces creation wants to happen in
when you make all things new
faces the jasmine wants to see
faces the constellations are finally missing.

And if you don't answer prayers,
I understand it is because miracles are too easy.
It is for the sake of our faiths,
and for the sake of that wall, which must follow
its own rules and has its own prayers.

But what if we need miracles
because Reason is a child who wants to be a butterfly;
Logic can live only on surprises, and Transformation
is the longing that drives all of nature's laws?

Gravity, though it stands like a sentinel
gravely under every bough of apples
and tugs at every moon and sun until it rattles,
what if it is at heart a boy
who wants to catch with perfect glee
just one of the falling stars, and say "again"?

Physics wants to play tag with the particles
and pull rabbits out of the hats of protons.
And Math wants to knead clay to life
(as you once did)
solemnly, with water and theorems,
and newly imagined numbers
that breathe even as they hold their breath
under the clay.

Everything wants to be alive. What if?

Then we, who still walk among these things
like ghosts among solids, maybe it is our work
to simply keep wanting, deliberately,
to lean over the ledge of our beings
like a ship's figurehead far into the night.

With not seeing as our guide - love
and all the bushes that don't burn.

THE ONLY CHRISTMAS LEFT

The christmas that gives thanks for
having enough to give to the poor
is not the christmas you want to be born in.

You, who reserved your vision for the blind,
your best parable for the dumb, you
would want to be born in the other christmas
that must give truer thanks,
in the bitter tongue of poverty,
for crumbs and for well wishes it can't eat -
the christmas that must say
“thank you” out loud,
or starve.

What you want are hunters
who stay awake all their lives, miners
who dig for you under their clothes
and on the faces they see– the contorted ones
who have never known the difference
between humiliation and humility.
And there at that lower end of charity -
like a spring of fresh water at the bottom of the sea:
that's the water you promised.

You want to be with those who sleep with fire,
those who pray with fire,
and set your church on fire – only
to put them out again with their tears.
(This is the water you want to be.)

You, who insist we put you in a manger
year after year, in a scene of nativity
of refugees under the star of occupation
so you may stay poor among the poor,
on the side of the poor until poverty is love.
This is the water you are.

And the poor will one day
truly give thanks for crumbs;
they will sink to the bottom of the sea,
find their spring of sweet water,
and never be thirsty again.

LILIES OF THE FIELD

- after Matthew 6:28

The lilies I will consider:
unkept colours who don't spin,
clothed more gloriously than kings
because they refuse all clothes, buds
that wear their hearts on their tips
so God may be sayable in petals.

The chastity I want to mean:
spouses male and female, who pray by sheer display
of their sexes loud as spring, who unbutton
their very selves to pray in the inner nudity
of their stamens and fountains,
raised on ends by the pressure their seeds.

The wedding I have always been:
virgins who keep their watch
till they outwatch the night,
torchbearers who lift their lamps
though they have no star to burn.

The springtime I now understand:
sprouts that spill beyond their stems
earth's summer that lights heaven with its flame.
And blossoms that live looking up
unwavering though they wither
until they are more faith than flower.

If I have seen riches in poverty
sweet superfluity and plain opulence in nudity,
my lord in the brevity of flesh
breakable buds that die opening:

the parable the valley finally tells
the lilies I will consider.

HOLY SATURDAY

The Word is dead,
what was in the beginning, the vowels
the lizards are still breaking
from between their teeth: a broken Om..
pieces of night they still swallow by the gulps
and spit out chirping under our houses
stunned that we don't answer.

The Word they are looking for has been laid to stone.

The lilies have built a church at the hub of their petals
an altar for your absence under the spires of the stamens
an open apse for all to see
(Look, there really is no one here).

But spring is their show, disclosure their fruit.
Tear apart the flesh, put your fingers
into their wounds,
and your hands will pray on their own
(They are more faithful than the tongue.
And the whole valley is full of churches no one can say).

The moths have struck their matches;
they are clapping their hands until
they themselves go bright
in the one silent night that says nothing in its silence.

The Word is dead,
the sleep that sleeps within what sleeps
has laid its breath to stone

“Come all of you who are weary
I will give you rest.”

HOW TO LOVE THE DEAD

- For Mother

You climbed no mountain, named no country
Motherhood came like the monsoon
It poured and we were happy

But the rain moved on
We didn't hold on or mourn
The unseized days the unsaid love

And there lies your death
With neither season nor stone for your children to keep

I don't regret this
Or that your story ended before it finished

For who can finish their lives before life finishes with them
Who can drink the whole cup
Whether they count their time in years or in generians

The seized and the unseized days lay equally still
On yesterday's path unspent of their true substance
Gift we can receive only in parts
Eternity in the husk of countable days

A tree is inwardly untouched
Whether we climb or contemplate or cut it down
And the earth is untransformed
Whether we plow or ponder or pave it over

Nothing is ever done and we rightly rebel
We proclaim death the most unnatural of things
Though the body has its morning and evening
And does not protest
The fire we are would burn forever but for the limit of its fuel
(And does brightly protest in our chest)

How then do I love the dead?
The mother who had done all she could
The life unfinished, which is every life

It was death itself that one night answered
In one bright stroke brief as a brush
That it had its face turned to the future not the past

That its proper term is not memory or monument but faith
A thing as constant as current
That all lives will be complete because none will end
That the torrent goes on on the other side of the river
In bodies moulded of clay the second time

Do not look for her in the past
Her memory is not all you have
Receive the mountain she carried instead of climbed
The true weight of being she is passing on

And pray
A rosary for her resurrection
Your hope bead by bead
In a counting that by staying small
Calls down infinity from its seat
To pool like water in the cup of your hand

A LOVE SUPREME

-A tribute to John Coltrane's

The Word is not spoken,
the very first thing the sigh wanted to mean, the cry
that runs along the ridges of mountains
from left to right: original text
that sinks toward evening where the highway
loses its sight.

The Word that is not spoken.

Not the thousands we mince between the teeth
and spit out without changing the sum.
But the Word who was born, died,
was buried, and rose from the dead.
Where did we lose him, lose the will
to want him?

The Word that is broken.

Not the millions of pixels that don't make
one whole rose, the tidy types
everybody can read but no one
can lift from the page or the screen,
still open still torn: twilight
that falls apart when no one is pretending.

But what no one dares
is what you can't resist, what lies
deaf in the crook of the saxophone.
You want blood from music, no longer
the violin of sayable feelings, but the torrent in its
own terms, that writhing masculine cry
that has nowhere else to go, blowing in tongue
through the throat of brass,
the twenty-three mouths gaping like nestlings
that construe the sky by their hunger:
a stuttering of the now,
sheets of sound that will keep wailing
until they are word, protest
that must amount to praise, God -
when nothing else is love.

And love that plunges
through the heart like gravity
even when we are not flying, what music,
if we let it, goads us to dare,
the lyrics all of earth's rain is trying to mean.

The Word that is not yet.

A love supreme.
A love supreme.

MARY MAGDALENE

She guides your hand to her belly;
she puts her mouth to yours, releases the
the kiss a thousand men have tasted
but none could keep. In their mouths,
it turns bitter, and sharp as a knife.

But you take it as balm, this kiss of
frailty and simple need, balm
for the blow from that other, opposite kiss.

She takes off her clothes, shows you
her body. 'It is not defiled' you tell her.
She shows you the places men have paid for
"They are made of love."

You take off your clothes
and show her your wounds, where you are revealed
as if through your second clothes.
"You are broken," she says.

And your mouth,
where you are first opened,
she puts her hand over your mouth:
No word.

AT DAY'S END, A PRAYER

Take my land
Till my hands

Thread my bones into a single string
And let them fall into your palm
Like a necklace without its pearls

Take my house and my castle
Cut them up like bread
Feed them to the poor, and the crows also

Let my unfinished work lie where they are
The love I could not end
The love I could not start
Look how perfectly they have closed themselves
Like a rose in reverse:

An offering at your altar
Only you could understand

Take my land
Till my hands