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Elegies & Epitaphs

[First Set: Songs for Particular Persons]

Going to Maria's

[For Maria Caldana]

The night we came to meet you stays in my memory
As little bits of sentimental film.

It was on a dream-distant winter evening
When we took a dusty, rattling train from Austria to
Your Italy, in a carriage shared with mice
And one evil-smelling shabby man.

We ate bittersweet chocolate (the wrapper crackled) and
Played cards until the light began to fade.

The dusk was coming up one streetlamp at a time
Toward us the way kids at home
Played stealthy games of Red Light/Green Light...
The darkness thickened down by the ground first.

Faint, fairytale snow, powdered sugar dusting a
Devil's Food cake, made the colors gradually disappear
Until the scenery turned into a black and white etching,
Spidery and vacuum-silent.

In the changing light, my unreliable tired eyes
Saw things that might or might not
Be illusions invented by a moving train,
Inanimate objects taking walks, sneaking,
Racing the shadows to catch our train.

And somewhere in the deepening dark ahead,
You were waiting for us,
Haloed by pallid station light,
Your smile a sight more beautiful than all
The sugar-dusted miles of the borderlands.

Leaving Maria

[For Maria Caldana]

Melon slices in prosciutto bring to mind the summer day when we

sat in a triangle in the tiled and shuttered kitchen, hot, sipping lukewarm effervescent mineral water and eating the coolness of sweet fruit with such slow savor as to try to stretch the coolness far enough to cover us, to start a breeze that would ruffle even the heaviness of the pregnant fig tree outside the shutter for awhile; we sat fluttering our hands and talking in low tones that should take no more energy than our so-slow sipping and melon-eating did; we talked in that dark hot shade about Verona: she would say, *You must go to Verona next, and see the bridges, and go to the opera* (and, she didn't say, *Remember Me*); all that while, we didn't know that those pains of hers were cancerous. But it is just like her that now the memory is not of her pain (and it must have been very great) but of our usual talk of towns and of great music, of that weighty and shuttered August stillness, a drowsy memory of melon slices and sparkling water.

How Sweet the Moment/For The Girl Who Never Was

[For Jon & Ruth's daughter Teresa, who died in the womb]

The brief incendiary
Flicker that was you
Was too soon spent,
Too tantalizing and too wholly pure;

For what exquisite agonies,
The price we dearly
And reluctantly
Would pay—so dear,
But still, a thousand times again.

That we know
And never can or should forget,
But then,
How sweet the moment was,
How crystalline
The light
Before your briefly
Blazing natal sun
Was wholly set.

Sonnets for Master & Student

I Keyboard Position

*[For Harold Heiberg, 1922-2013,
& James Dale Holloway, 1960-2001]*

I went to hear a singer sing his due
Recital and to learn to love his voice,
Yet on the instant knew I had no choice
But watch th' accompanist and think of you,
For when they came onstage a dream began
As German art-songs sung up from a deep

Chasm of voice that ought to haunt my sleep,
My heart was drawn instead to that tall man
Curled over the piano in that soft,
Sprung posture that in you I used to know,
When you assumed it, meant that you would go
Anon, and play your listeners aloft
To dazzling heights of ecstasy and free-
Fall back with us to depths of bronze despair
Because your fluid playing pulled us there,
And art, remembered now, that let me see
That this man taught those notes to you, each one,
And from his posture, know you were his son.

II Nocturne

[For James Dale Holloway, 1960-2001]

You always play the Evensong or toll
The close of Compline on that rank of keys
That lets the darkness in at night and sees
No morning come again where dawn should roll
Its banner out, because your day is past,
Untimely so, and others left behind
Whose love for you through music was refined,
And evening services to hold us fast
Within your arms; now elders play the songs
As you'd have done if time had let you play
A lifetime—even just another day—
With melody to right the thousand wrongs
That took you from our midst, that stopped the tune,
Left only other hands to tend the notes,
And threw you like a star among the notes
Before you could play in another June.
Now summers come no more, nor daylight's dawn,
Though through the night your music lingers on.

A Photograph Taken in 1933

[For Janet Anita Wold, ca.1931-34]

A particular kind of searing yellow-green,
When it appears on the razor's edge of spring,
Always breaks in me with such an aching ardor...
Seventy years lying face down under a fine sheet of dust
Are still not enough, it seems, to allow reawakening;
Not of the child—though that's the yearning part—
Or even this faint memory of her short, sweet blossoming.

Only artifice could paint that cheek with the ripening
Tint of such maturity, a tender rosy apricot
Complete in fullness only like the coy deceit of
Wax fruits in the old front hall epergne, whose candles,
Too, had long since ceased to burn.

Even the scent of the smoke has faded to nothing, crept away.
Is the pang here something new with seasons' change,
Or merely a hope that never truly died beneath the veil
Of undisturbed attic forgetfulness? I only know
That a particular kind of searing yellow-green,
When it appears on the razor's edge of spring,
Always breaks in me again with aching ardor.

Lisa Gay

[For Lisa Gay Omli, 1966-71]

Lisa lovely, Lisa light,
A sugar-porcelain doll one day
Whose long-lashed eye made noontide-bright
More than a million stars could stay
The deep of night, sweet Lisa Gay.

How fit that you should winter-die,
When five's the hour of daylight's death
And like your veins the silver sigh
Of snowy birches' sap holds breath
'Til by and bye the seasons' stealth

Revivifies the sleeping trees.
Now only wait what radiance
Returns to life that dormant freeze:
Let every limb move into dance
And Lisa waken, too, by chance...

Lisa lovely, Lisa light,
A sugar-porcelain doll one day
Whose long-lashed eye made noontide-bright
More than a million stars could stay
The deep of night, sweet Lisa Gay.

Bright Dahlias

[For Neil Lieurance 1943-2014]

The autumn came too soon, and left a pallor on the pretty paint
of those tall dahlias that you had nurtured faithfully, their saint;
It turned them into shadows of
themselves too soon, shadows of love...
Frost cut them down and took them in its bony hands to steal their dance
the graces you had tended there so tenderly, by circumstance,
From shoot to bud to blooming beds,
by stealthy ice that bowed their heads...
And you saw early autumn, too, too soon—were bit untimely by
the frost and plucked from gardening, the sun still in your sky-blue eye
Made winter's sparkling snowy air
of beauties we were loath to spare...
Yet all this theft you had foreseen, and readied us to stay and tend
bright dahlias, each, our own; to go on gardening, and so amend

Our sorrows in your still-wide gaze
by passing on your gentle ways...
The rich inheritance you gave still grows like dahlias among
us all, your heirs, and in their turn, those we raise up as happy young
New imitators of your gift
for singing to give hearts a lift...

[Second Set: for All the Dead]

[Note: I conceived of the following piece, 'hearing' it in my head as a soloist + ensemble backup doing the italicized segments either as refrains or undercurrent to the solo text. But there's no reason it couldn't be differently done, of course. A similar concept also guided the writing of Last Lullaby, which follows this poem.]*

Brevity

We know that love is rare and fleet,
though sweetly brightening—
the way a spark can split the heat
with summer lightning

You came and danced among the rays,
your music singing,
made us forget the End of Days
with laughter winging

*all in a moment, blink of an eye,
sweep of the river passing by.*

Then, out! and gone, all out of time,
away beyond our reckoning,
unfairly stealing the Sublime,
our Rhyme, to distant beckoning.

Yet rain and darkness also die,
leave in their wake new brilliance,
the trace of tears less bitterly
replaced by love's resilience,

*all in a moment, blink of an eye,
sweep of the river passing by.*

***Last Lullaby**

Fall upward forever
to infinite light,
upward and inward
to infinite ease—

down, ever dreaming—
pellucid and streaming,
silken, it seems, into

bottomless seas.

Rise in your sleeping
to limitless joy,
carried on wings of
new day and sweet night—
never grow old, or
grow weary, or colder
than summer's first bloom
in perpetual Light.

*Requiescat in aeternam,
Dona eis requiem;
In aeternum Lux,
Lux perpetua.*

**[This last quatrain imagined, of course, as chant, whether opening and/or closing the piece or intertwined with the singing of the other text.]*

Bittersweet

Nothing is so cruel
as to show the stars
sparkling in their sky,
wild light set high
in velvet night,
then steal
them utterly from sight,
leave in their wake
the icy scream of Nothingness—
not less, but rather more
the terrible because
there was before
such dazzling light...
and yet this price,
impossible to pay,
stays bittersweet—
its blue-black void
remembers height
and breadth of stars,
recalls the supernova-bright
delight of days
whose music plays
incessantly in our hearts
that knew and loved
the stars who gave,
however brief, a flight,
in vaulting joy,
of brilliant light.

May We All Rest in Peace

We think of you

On every day
As light and shadow
Fleeting by
Give out reminders
In their flight
Of moments past
And loving, sigh
For sorrow or
For jubilation,
It matters neither
Way, though true
That all evoke
These memories
Of how we did—
And do—love you.

Naturally

Following the steps of Nature, in my time I'll go to sleep
and slough off my human stature, an appointment I must keep
whether soon or late or sudden, whether willingly or no,
taking nothing, I am bidden, as to dust—beyond—I go,
to a deep cellular cellar, shut from day and gone from night,
simple mote or something stellar, eternally both dark and bright;
I've no grief at this my bedding down to death as time requires,
but will go with no regretting to new lands and distant fires—
or to deep chasms' silent spaces, nothing moving, nothing moved,
nothing touched by ills or graces or by sweetness I once loved,
for my thoughts will too lie resting, speechless, dreamless, all release;
all exemption now from testing, seamlessly wrapped up in peace—
So I'll leave you, soft, in quiet
naturally inclined to sigh
with something of
relief, a sigh yet
not of sorrow,
when
I die

Beloved Mysterious

Beloved Mysterious, if you could see
The blood-dark river hid inside of me
With longing deep as chasms unexplored
Through which, from which, in which that love is poured
In endless flood of hope and of desire
As hot and wild and dangerous as fire
Then you would know the depth, the liquid breath
That carries love for you beyond my death.

Shrouded

What is the measure of sorrow's depth? A mile, a fathom? Soullessness?
Is it a silent suffering or screaming agony? Or less

Than nothing? Is true sorrow deep as midnight? Is it fiery? Cold?
Is't a return to youthful helplessness, or falling instant-old?
Who knows the grief in its extreme that tells how deep sorrow can grow?
Only the ghosts of doubt can guess at this: I hope I never know.

Entropy's Secret

Long have I lain in quiet wait, Neither quite dead nor yet asleep,
But gathering strength in my resting state For the moment soon, when I may leap,
Arise, alight anew, awake—I've many promises to keep—
So let me lie, for mercy's sake, As the way ahead is hard and steep;
The universe is in flux and change, And while the incremental creep
Appears to grow toward something strange, I know in my soul, hidden and deep:
I lie here, close to tomorrow's range, Not dead, in stasis, nor yet asleep...

Her Bones are Glass

Her bones are glass; the diamonds in her eyes
Now shining dust, yet still and otherwise,
Though time says that she must, she still decries
The need, opposes it by effort, will
And awful grief and rage at what would kill
Her body, spirit, mind and heart, until
She mounts the ridges of that final hill,
'Til battle's over and the victory won;
So while she harries them, Age sets her sun
A-fade, Time lets her hourglass empty run,
Approach the space where sleep and she are one;
The sands thin silently, passing to less-
Than-empty, right to utter nothingness,
In view but fading, to her pale distress,
Her winding-sheet already worn for dress,
'Til battle's over and the victory won;
Comfort she needs, yet I can offer none
'Til battle's over and her victory won.

The World in Autumn

Thin branches caging up the sun
In willow-wavy lacelike hands,
All skeletons and ampersands,
Hold clouds together in the one
Unreadable yet literate
Equation of the interstices
Whose elated season this is,
Crisp and quite deliberate
In tracing every moment in it,
Hour, year, and state of mind
Among the bones of humankind,
As though these things were infinite.

Stolen Away

Too soon, cold sorrow steals from me the light

Of promise, of the hope for growing love
Which I had longed to see his mastery of
Bring him to see such stars divide the night
That he might know it possible that day
Was his as much as anyone's, and keep
Alive, alight, and not succumb to sleep
As refuge from an endlessly dark way,
But my poor strivings—anyone's, I guess—
Could never generate the power he
Required to light enough so he could see
In such great bleakness any happiness,
And love and hope, invisible and far
From him as he from me, my distant star.

To Rest in Peace

Alas! for shadows carve my collarbones
and misery is lapping at my heels;
Death's machinations turn, wheels within wheels,
and grind me for its grist between cold stones—
And yet, as dust-dry as I turn, breath blooms
persistently, a torture to my soul
when I had rather be devoured whole
and go on into Peace's empty rooms—
Still, here I stay, lie atomized, forlorn,
forgotten on the fringes of what life
and loves I knew once, when my days were rife
with possibility as a new morn—
Let me die now, not live without a chance
of altering this endless Totentanz.

How Fleeting is My Soul

O, perfidy! that, fugitive, elopes
With all that filled my soul with meanings rare,
And character, and hung up in the air
What history I knew, and all my hopes,
My senses, and my sense, unleashed them all;
Left me unmoored, untethered, in the wind,
Subject to every buffeting, unpinned;
And burning like an effigy, to fall
In ashen flakes and caught in drafts, to drift
Apart from faithless memory, and pine
For everything I thought was Me and Mine,
Now tantalizing from across a rift.
What once defined and marked me as my own
Has fled, and Self has left me quite alone.

Enfold Me in the Green

Enfold me in the green breast of the earth
And gently speak my name with love once more,
Then turn and take your way to what's before

You now, that all the world will know your worth

As I was blessed to know it in my time—
That hand, unstinting in its tender care,
The scent of rain around you everywhere,
Your slightest whisper in my ear sublime—

That now you'll speak to other waiting ears.
For now I sleep; let earth be the embrace
To keep me kindly in my newer place
While yours will others bless in coming years.

I thank you, now I need no more the sun
That shall be yours until *your* day is done.