

DOWN STRANGER ROADS

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VISITANT

Despite the snow banked high to ice,
the parking lot was jammed with cars
the day the former Poet Laureate
came flying into town, first-class.

Twilight.

Somewhere in the sky that's bigger than America,
the blue-grey calf-skin leather creaks
soft against his neck
and soft beneath his palms. The airplane slowly turns,
banks into its leisurely decline
toward another city's lights,
its suburbs twinkling. It will not be long
until he'll stand rehearsing someone else's lines
written long ago when he was someone else.
These days he never writes.

THANKSGIVING MORNING

On the day that all the world had died,
standing on my front door step
with coffee in the dark blue mug I'd bought
in Hartford, at some wordy conference,
I idly pressed my bell

and caught
in that ding-dong hackneyed chime
the sound that suddenly meant you,
the one you must each time have faintly heard through wood
before the hurtling urgency of me inside,
summoned by banality that I
alone can recognize
as blasphemously you, uniquely you, so
freshly newly you each time, bringing your immeasurable
gift
of yourself

which has me capering
while in my living room the samovar
waltzes my candlesticks dizzy,
and on the floor my Turkish carpet undulates
like some exotic deep-sea ray.

And there I'd be,
in one great sweep all fingers fumbling off your wedding ring
and smoothing with my palms
your long black coat away to hang it up among
the jingling uncooperative triangles of wire,
and kissing every nearest bit of you, no matter what,
and helter-skelter tumbling out
my questions, telling you
all the things that I presumed
of interest in my dreary day

until you came
and pressed the bell
and made me happy

then.

Alone, of course,
again and again

I press my bell

and every time, although it's not
—although my reason tells me that it's not—
it's you, it's you, it's always always you.

VIEW OF DELFT

Here, close to where four centuries ago
Johannes Vermeer stood, looked the other way,
I shiver on this iron bridge, watch Delft grow
dour, unpicturesque, its river edged
with tidy drab concerns: Gerritschikken,
Popinflas, Loew and Stein. Further on,
a smudge of ill-lit shops. In the distance,
cranes. There the harbor begins.

This is a prospect of the edge of things.
No guidebook, signpost, names the nondescript,
directs one's steps to places such as this,
unless by chance. But in this spot,
as daylight weakens and as shapes congeal,
the eye unjostled and the mind unforced
by beauty's spiring self-insistencies
are stilled. Nothing moves. Only the blue
darkening. A bridge. One man standing in subdued
exhilaration, sensing that to him alone
words might confide themselves, words not rubbed smooth
by numberless hands, but words made new, made real
by circumstance as fresh as paint,
that only colors, is unstaled by use.

Near silence. Solitude. The gradual
ebb and leakage into truth.

FLUCHTLINGSKINDER

(Two young Jewish refugees from Germany at a porthole of the liner St. Louis)

As if composed for the photographer
who held his lens in front of them,
then gave the sisters each a foreign coin
and walked back to his life,
the two young girls are framed,
their elbows on the porthole's rim.
Each has her small clean raincoat on.
Each is looking down.

Miami, where the tongues were strange, said no.
Lisbon, where the tongues were strange, said no.
They're looking down at Antwerp now.

SELF-DISLIKE AT A POETRY READING

“This next one’s a prose poem,” he declares,
and I think what were all the others then,
and scan the audience a second time,
less hopefully, for girls. Meanwhile,
threatening interminability,
the preamble (indistinguishable, I presume,
from what’s to come, if come it ever does)
anacondas round the staling room, between the rows
of institution chairs and regulars upon
the institution chairs, or some of them, and no one’s
listening apparently; and once again
the churlish energetic loneliness
takes hold.

There’s a bar just down the street.

There is indeed a bar just down the street
and I could be there, there expansively to contemplate
the art that is a pint of Guinness,
soupy, long and dark. Instead, I reason with myself
that I am here for poetry, to get a sense
of “what is going on around these parts.”
I do not tell myself that I am here for love
nor admit how often my miss-hearings prove
the germs of poems of my own (no trace of debt)
which in my tidy Moleskine I secrete
for the hours when I am not on edge
upon a hardening chair
in one small room that’s filling with my prayers.

But when he’s finished, I applaud.
I applaud, I tell you, I applaud.

THE MODEL

Before the dullish mirror bolted firm
upon the pastel wall, she contemplates
the body wholly hers at last, undressed,
and scrutinizes one by one and then
together for their full effect her breasts
unmagnified by prying high-power zoom.
This week it's Tel Aviv: Manhattan next.

Fifteen floors below, the car horns blare.
Room service came and went. She sips a Kahlua,
surveys herself again. She doesn't sport
the cultivated sultry lip-curved sneer
that drives men wild, she's told, and made
her somewhat famous, so she hears. Instead
she eyes her father in the fullness of

that mouth, and in the stare that, slightly cruel,
reminds her of the office in Lahore,
pistachios in a copper bowl, the phone
that rang and rang upon his desk, ignored,
his fingers swarthy round the heavy glass,
the hawkers' cries outside, and then the hush
as dusk became ornate with minarets.

How stale it all became, so soon! How scattered,
dulled, she feels, how altered now from when
her school-friends envied her the jet-set whirl
of limousines and suites and cocktail bars
where drinks were always on the house. She hums
a line or two from Paul McCartney's song
"Another Day" and sees, twelve hours away

beyond the customs wall a pacing man
whose avoirdupois fingers will arrange
the sand next day to trickle crystalline
between her thighs so bronzed, so taut, so trim,
so un-alive. She sighs. She wonders if
at twenty-eight, when at the corners of
her glossy pout the lines begin to draw

the character that no one's ever thought
to get to know. . .And suddenly, as though
she'd walked out of a frowsty room into
a village street of sun-warmed twilight air
giving way to stone-strewn roads that led
through cornfields pricked with poppies, bursts the mood
for 1920's jazz, King Oliver,

the boisterous breaking-out, the push and pull
of notes so brassy-crisp, each one about
its busyness of joy. Her foot begins
to tap tap tap and soon she's capering,
her glass a-tilt, inventing scraps of lines
in nonsense random French, remembering
the curtains billowing like sails into

the downstairs cottage rooms and how the wind
those girlhood summers blew the sea inland,
resinous with pines. Again she longs,
fifteen floors above a noisy street,
for garlic singing in the pan, and knows
the loss of meals no waiter ever brought,
obsequious, but those she'd make herself:

the innocence of scrambled eggs; the toast
that jumped up merry from its silver box,
the coffee gurgling at its own concerns
of being made, one sunbeam slanting long. . .

She looks around the room. Still life. The phone
unringing by the tundra of her bed,
king-size, the two small lamps above, the phone. . .

The air conditioning begins to hum.

HERON

Fear, ferocity, astonishment in one
maddish eye of yours from Audubon
beneath a few spiked feathers for a crest.
Thin raincoated William Burroughs of a bird
stalking hypodermically
toe-deep in shingle
or shallows of a stream.

But on the wing,
shouldering off with six great languid flaps
all birdbook posturing, you rise magisterial.
World stills to background as you soar
down the evening path you deign as yours
sternly to master.

And all the tumblers, acrobats,
all the gauzy zoomers of the air,
dull themselves to baubles, gauds,
drawing not one scrape of syllable
from you as in your slaty glide you rule
one gray line unwavering
between the earth and sky.

IN THE VONDELPARK, AMSTERDAM

And the old dogs toddling
after their owners

while the whippersnappers
come snuffle-barging in on your attentions,
proffering the absurdity of themselves
to you, calm at last,
on your curved wooden bench.

Every six years or so
you come back here, put up at the same hotel
in the Anna van den Vondelstraat,
around the corner from the Vondelkerk's
slatted graphite spike of a spire

and after breakfast let the long
paths and pathways of the Vondelpark
take you strolling, skirting the ponds
with their dabbling, puttering, squabbling waterfowl

while others pass: tracksuited i-podded
girls, cyclists at ease, the dogged
jogplodding old.

And gathered into these, yet separate,
again you ponder how remarkable it is
that here, without your stir,
everything at its accordant pace recedes
unobtrusively into focus: in the reeds
the movement of a whitened branch
delineates a heron, hidden from your eyes
until with smooth hydraulic glide
of neck and needling head into its shoulder blades
it draws forward
to the edge of memory, makes real
the illustration you thrilled at as a child
in that book of birds, and thrill at still
in wearish adulthood: the hunched
grimness on stilts, the bristling austerity.

And gradually, one by one,
the old joys that were never truly gone
return themselves, deep in the green heart
of a foreign city; and in quiet
exhilaration you stroll round again,
wondering how you got it all so wrong
for so many years.

TO W. B. YEATS'S "TO A SQUIRREL AT KYLE-NA-NO"

Anthologized by no one, you appear
in his *Collected Works* as is your right—
the leaves aswirl, the hare and hounds run wild,
cracked Ireland and a devastating bitch,
each hooped in history's daemonic gyre;
the schoolchildren agog, the old men crazed,
all sinew, fleas and wisdom-glittering glare,
and he himself there striding up and down,
his reason whirled by ocean's churning tongues
which blast the future of his sleeping child.

Your eight short lines announce a different truth.
Immortalized by what you never were,
a puzzlement to those whose Yeats descants
a proud and haughty strain but never stoops
to things that anyone might feel and say,
you tell with calm and lack of artifice
how walking in a wood at Kyle-na-no
he saw, with sudden love, a squirrel run
away from him. He simply wished to play
a while, and stroke its head, then let it go.