Watch
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One
FROM THE HEIGHTS

My vision is partial, my voice middling, and I do not trust myself to the heights though everything here below begins to mingle and seem to me part of one canvas: ego, self-delusion, and pride in an infinite hall of mirrors with reflection mirroring all the old self-deceptions masquerading as penitential retractions. As I ride the bus up the mountain, the water below is no longer white as at dawn when I looked out and felt as if glimpsing the hem of heaven’s wedding dress.

Earlier even, walking before dawn, I heard one bird singing to itself and wondered to myself whether it was a caged bird on someone’s balcony in the early cold till warbling began to answer in another tree across the street and then suddenly a mounting crescendo of other songs loudly greeting the morning not yet arrived, welcoming it into light, into the full presence of day, after which I hear nothing but traffic and the noises that people make going about their daily business.
The driver tells me of his town near Spain, north of Toulouse, where Louis Treize tried to kill all the Protestants, where the former president of the Spanish Republic was buried during the civil war because he could find no peace at home. (Aragon and Picasso fled to France, as well, Aragon leaving his mother speech to sing the nightingale’s slaughter.) The town still bears the scars of the King’s bombardments. We climb higher and higher. I think of Daourt’s paintings, of the blue openings that appear so often in them. The labyrinth of scaffolding in one, workmen transfixed in the middle of their labor, and in lonely apartments across the way a woman hidden in impossible contortions, and everywhere sad, magisterial cats looking at us questioningly. Even in her studio, the crossing lines of light and shadow, despite her large, open work space, feels like a spider web of work, the rectangular blue above and the light caught in a high window—glimpses of transcendence.

During the occupation, Daourt was protected in the house of the Comtesse in Marseille, but after liberation, her mind grew worse until she began to dress in newspapers
and beg in the streets. I climb another hill in Nice to the Chagall Museum

where a young Japanese artist asks me (I don’t know why) the significance of the “arc-en-ciel” and whether there’s a biblical story. I say that God destroyed the world in a flood yet promises never to flood the world again. *It means hope.*

In the next room, I stand before *L’Exode.* Christ hangs in the cross high in the center but a flood of people moves up and to the left through fire, a blue woman suckling her child, hopelessly, buildings falling in fire, an artist, head turned unnaturally backward from the window, framed by the cross in the glass (no, this is another painting I’m remembering), a spectral virgin floating toward death, a mother and child born into a sea of floating, drowning faces, and the Christ glowing in a white nimbus,

his face dark in contrast. I look back and forth from the slaughter (a child put down on the ground by his mother beside a little billy goat looking up to the hand stroking it.) Christ’s right eye is gouged, I think. Then, no: *If thy right eye offend thee,*

\textit{pluck it out.}
DIGS
Marnay-sur-Seine, Champagne

The menhir in a blue field of wheat
cuts a yellow line of rapeseed and the white
lips of recycling pits.

I walk to the darkened holes
of log poles, a long house, Neolithic, the pit
of pottery shards and bone pits, to the dark
hardened place that held fire.

Yesterday
I startled a red fox near the road. It leapt fire
from tuft
to tuft
into a thicket.

I suckle on signs,
a sparrow hawk heckling a heron,
the heron spinning slowly before lifting.

Merovingian graves: a mother and two children
knees to chest in earth ova—and I think
much more of me may remain than I had thought or hoped.
On the sarcophagus, white waves, chiseled grain
in wind at an angle, a brass buckle,
an iridescent vial;

\textit{tumuli}, circles in a circle;

an iron age granary;

a Roman road.

I imagine angles, eyes, who made what’s made,
hands holding stone, bronze, or iron,
or flesh and bone alone, clutches of people,
transfiguring spirits and tongues,
what I speak, eat, and feel made up of bits of them
so grain’s good, birth first, and the fresh fruit sweet:
it isn’t their ends any more than them I meet.
RIVER

A loon dives in the swollen river.
It followed the river first.
The town lies between it and canals
Diverted from the river.
The beak of the loon is orange,
Its wingspan broader than a duck’s.

My father’s legs were swollen.
His once thin ankles barely fit his shoes.
His heart no longer fed his body.
Toxins and liquids began to drown him.
His silly doctors didn’t see
He couldn’t breathe.

My father took me to the river.
We fished for bass and bluegill,
Sunfish, cats. Fat suckers,
Their lips like suction cups,
We put back. Too many little bones
To catch and make you choke.
I no longer want to go fishing.
I don’t even want to play
In the water. The boat
Here has no oars, the current
Is too swift. In the dark, teenagers
Discover their body together.

The body feels like a prison.
I kneel by my father’s stapled body.
He suctions thick liquid from his lungs.
He coughs to clear them; it hurts.
He wants more air. He wants
To live, the heart’s valve’s parachutes

Opening with oxygen to feed
The body’s healing. A tube
Empties the chest cavity. He excretes
Liquids and poisons.
His shocked kidneys come to life.
His stunned heart beats. His lung

Opens again. He eats. He poops.
He walks. He wants to go home.
On the phone, I catch my sister
Taking him home. It’s snowing.
It’s cold. My brother and mother
Help him climb the stairs.
I walk down the path
By the shallow canal. I see
A falcon fishing. The power plant
Breathes steam. I hope
The wind won’t singe me.
I come to the falls

Where a little dog
Barks and bounces hello. His owner
Smiles and greets me. In the church
Of Saint Laurence I kneel, I
Give thanks, my heart jumps.
EXCESS
after Henri Michaux

I’ve pushed the door open inside.
I’m here, already, to give you
What you’ve been needing, what you want

So badly it makes you ache. Take
That sudden illness dropped like lead—
I lift it. I act. My joy’s this

Quick. Cuts, stitched, heal, and fever falls.
Hair grows back. Food tastes good.
I stop that superabundance

Of cells. Now only good excess
Greets you with smiles and ease.
You sit in the sun. The carafe

Of water reflects the windows
You can’t see, peripheries
Possibilities opening!

You drink them in the sun, happy.
You enjoy the company
Of those you don’t know and those
You love, too, here with you.
There is time. Old voices that say
You'll have nothing to offer

I shut them all up.
I show them the door where they will
Be able to cripple only

Themselves with malice. I free you
Too from that malice. You pity them.
You are able to be

Happy in this cool sun.
Slanderers do not
Envy you. (You’ve done nothing

To merit their anger.) Your conscience is
Light and when able
You’ve made amends, nor have you

Hidden knives in apologies.
I give you work with a purpose
You’ve chosen. Anxiety

Doesn’t keep you up. When the Black
Ox treads on you his heavy hooves
Don’t teach you the wrong things.
(Without him, are we less?)
You welcome love. You grab the lock
Of the child as he comes and don’t

Love Chance’s ugly butt.
You are not impatient in grief.
Such grief as you meet’s a measure

Of love. I wash your future face.
The logjam’s broken.
Pleasure flows in again

Through these banks more
Than you thought possible.
I give you this robin’s egg blue

Left in the grass to take. I’ll say
Hello in the morning. We can meet
Friends and walk if you like.
It’s easy after the intensity
Of tubes, horns, and doctors to think
Maybe artless misery’s what’s true.
Arch Emily seemed to think so,
Who liked the look. But I give you the lie,
Death: die, you mere measurer.
You’re mean, and at your best if not
A sedan at least you’re an easy chair.
We don’t know you for what you do but for what
You undo, and what’s true you can’t undo.
“PAIN’S REQUIRED, SUFFERING OPTIONAL”

Knowing he shouldn’t feel so out of sorts,
Anxious in crowds, though crowds take little note
In point of fact, the pain in two small points
In the front of his head, radiating out
Making him dizzy, underwater, caught
Fearfully near the edge (the edge? of what?)
This too shall pass, he’s old enough to know,
But to what end, nothing he knows will show.
The middle of the road (more near the end)
With money enough (he can pretend)
Lucky in love in its various forms
Spouse, family, friendship, students (life is sweet)
He needs to find some friend to pull this splinter
Out of his gray matter and make him lighter
Again as (mercifully) he’s often been.
No one has planned
what grows in this ditch:
a couple of wild irises,
dark purple; and lighter
purple thistles whose leaves
imitate white rock; and then
the small, drooping blue flowers
whose leaves and stems are hairy
(I swear) and also
silvery; and wild mustard,
spindlier and higher than the rest,
with pale joints like Tinkertoys.
I’m leaving out the yellow
dandelion and the strange
colorless flowers with black
dots in the center of pale green
cups that the bees love so
that they make bee parties
and get unruly and make a racket.
(I swear, I had to stop
and figure it out!)
I say I saw a rock lizard, too,
flecked black and gray with bits
of what looked like rock
hanging from him.
I looked at him.
He became a rock.
So much seems to aspire
to be dry, white, and rocklike
in the pit of the ditch
and it isn't only
the failure I admire.
We pass the straits of the Cape
where grazing whales gather,
though they’re not, I’m told, social
creatures by nature.

Alice asks how they can sleep
if they must think to breathe.
Cranial hemispheres wink and wake
and alternate,

so whales are half-awake
and half-asleep, balanced between each
of our states
through dive and breach.

Once on the kitchen wall
of a dune shack I saw,
like a headdress,
the baleen of a whale—

frayed filaments
run from a thin,
curled, rib-like bone:
sieves for the sea.
Like this sickle-moon fin
“negatively buoyant”
I sink in sleep,
but end, I think, where I begin.

Following one as it leaves
two other whales we see
suddenly not what we’re heading for
but the asymmetrically

colored snout of a fin whale
as it rises parallel
within a stone’s
throw of the boat,

the great eye set back
water crashing rushing
to let me see where it ought to be.
I lose track,

the mottled chin’s marble
veined, swirling
through its green veil, which
the top jaw slits.

And then, that’s it,
I think. Nights I’m thrown
upright from my rest. Brine
thumps my chest.
Doves coupled in the limbs outside my room, and as I write, another grooms her neck. Companionate, my body’s length from me in the sun, she scratches once behind each eye, then fans her tail plumes, white at the ends, and pulls and straightens some. Her eyes are red, I noticed, when she looked inside to see if I might give her something, so I thought, though she seems much more interested in me as curiosity than anything.

She sounds her call, a hollow wooden bell, just twice, then flies, her wings whistling a song to the umbrella pine behind, his voice percussive like a flare drum, quiet now.

The body that I saw swimming the coast I lost as I looked down. It swims back now. Another bell, a tea spoon on a glass (apartments higher up), the sea below lapping at the white rock. The swimmer swims closer to shore. The spoon rings. A door shuts.
SENS

Christ’s the dark pistil (five red petals point)
Transecting with golden bars the bass viol,
His consort’s honeycomb, in counterpoint
As red moves toward me through my blue denial
Above the abandoned Samaritan,
The fall, the law, as if his sacrifice
Transfuses hives with the honey that ran
Straight from the center like a fragrant spice.
The facing apse: lids pop and people peep,
Full bodied, from graves. They are whole again
Though this window’s not: blank-pocked. Devils leap
Down: red, blue (finned?). The loved, in lines, walk in,
Or walk together on the way they know
Will show the way, or this is what they show.