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from

A LARGE NUMBER



1976

1
IN PRAISE OF FEELING BAD ABOUT YOURSELF

The buzzard never says it is to blame.
The panther wouldn't know what scruples mean.
When the piranha strikes, it feels no shame.
If snakes had hands, they'd claim their hands were clean.

A jackal doesn't understand remorse.
Lions and lice don't waver in their course.
Why should they, when they know they're right?

Though hearts of killer whales may weigh a ton,
in every other way they're light.

On this third planet of the sun
among the signs of bestiality
a clear conscience is Number One.

2
LIFE WHILE-YOU-WAIT

Life While-You-Wait.
Performance without rehearsal.
Body without alterations.
Head without premeditation.

I know nothing of the role I play.
I only know it's mine, I can't exchange it.

I have to guess on the spot
just what this play's all about.

Ill-prepared for the privilege of living,
I can barely keep up with the pace that the action demands.
I improvise, although I loathe improvisation.
I trip at every step over my own ignorance.
I can't conceal my hayseed manners.
My instincts are for hammy histrionics.
Stage fright makes excuses for me, which humiliate me more.
Extenuating circumstances strike me as cruel.

Words and impulses you can't take back,
stars you'll never get counted,
your character like a raincoat you button on the run—
the pitiful results of all this unexpectedness.

If I could just rehearse one Wednesday in advance,
or repeat a single Thursday that has passed!
But here comes Friday with a script I haven't seen.
Is it fair, I ask
(my voice a little hoarse,
since I couldn't even clear my throat offstage).

You'd be wrong to think that it's just a slapdash quiz
taken in makeshift accommodations. Oh no.
I'm standing on the set and I see how strong it is.

The props are surprisingly precise.

The machine rotating the stage has been around even longer.

The farthest galaxies have been turned on.

Oh no, there's no question, this must be the premiere.

And whatever I do

will become forever what I've done.

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UTOPIA

Island where all becomes clear.

Solid ground beneath your feet.

The only roads are those that offer access.

Bushes bend beneath the weight of proofs.

The Tree of Valid Supposition grows here
with branches disentangled since time immemorial.

The Tree of Understanding, dazzlingly straight and simple,
sprouts by the spring called Now I Get It.

The thicker the woods, the vaster the vista:
the Valley of Obviously.

If any doubts arise, the wind dispels them instantly.

Echoes stir unsummoned
and eagerly explain all the secrets of the worlds.

On the right a cave where Meaning lies.

On the left the Lake of Deep Conviction.
Truth breaks from the bottom and bobs to the surface.

Unshakable Confidence towers over the valley.
Its peak offers an excellent view of the Essence of Things.

For all its charms, the island is uninhabited,
and the faint footprints scattered on its beaches
turn without exception to the sea.

As if all you can do here is leave
and plunge, never to return, into the depths.

Into unfathomable life.

THE PEOPLE ON THE BRIDGE



1986

VIEW WITH A GRAIN OF SAND

We call it a grain of sand,
 but it calls itself neither grain nor sand.
 It does just fine without a name,
 whether general, particular,
 permanent, passing,
 incorrect, or apt.

Our glance, our touch mean nothing to it.
 It doesn't feel itself seen and touched.
 And that it fell on the windowsill
 is only our experience, not its.
 For it, it is no different from falling on anything else
 with no assurance that it has finished falling
 or that it is falling still.

The window has a wonderful view of a lake,
 but the view doesn't view itself.
 It exists in this world
 colorless, shapeless,
 soundless, odorless, and painless.

The lake's floor exists floorlessly,
 and its shore exists shorelessly.
 Its water feels itself neither wet nor dry
 and its waves to themselves are neither singular nor plural.
 They splash deaf to their own noise
 on pebbles neither large nor small.

And all this beneath a sky by nature skyless
 in which the sun sets without setting at all
 and hides without hiding behind an unminding cloud.
 The wind ruffles it, its only reason being
 that it blows.

A second passes.

A second second.

A third.

But they're three seconds only for us.

Time has passed like a courier with urgent news.

But that's just our simile.

The character is invented, his haste is make-believe,
 his news inhuman.

THE CENTURY'S DECLINE

Our twentieth century was going to improve on the others.
It will never prove it now,
now that its years are numbered,
its gait is shaky,
its breath is short.

Too many things have happened
that weren't supposed to happen,
and what was supposed to come about
has not.

Happiness and spring, among other things,
were supposed to be getting closer.

Fear was expected to leave the mountains and the valleys.
Truth was supposed to hit home
before a lie.

A couple of problems weren't going
to come up anymore:
hunger, for example,
and war, and so forth.

There was going to be respect
for helpless people's helplessness,
trust, that kind of stuff.

Anyone who planned to enjoy the world
is now faced
with a hopeless task.

Stupidity isn't funny.
Wisdom isn't gay.
Hope
isn't that young girl anymore,
et cetera, alas.

God was finally going to believe
in a man both good and strong,
but good and strong
are still two different men.

"How should we live?" someone asked me in a letter.
I had meant to ask him
the same question.

Again, and as ever,
as may be seen above,
the most pressing questions
are naïve ones.

CHILDREN OF OUR AGE

We are children of our age,
it's a political age.

All day long, all through the night,
all affairs—yours, ours, theirs—
are political affairs.

Whether you like it or not,
your genes have a political past,
your skin, a political cast,
your eyes, a political slant.

Whatever you say reverberates,
whatever you don't say speaks for itself.
So either way you're talking politics.

Even when you take to the woods,
you're taking political steps
on political grounds.

Apolitical poems are also political,
and above us shines a moon
no longer purely lunar.
To be or not to be, that is the question.
And though it troubles the digestion
it's a question, as always, of politics.

To acquire a political meaning
you don't even have to be human.
Raw material will do,
or protein feed, or crude oil,

or a conference table whose shape
was quarreled over for months:
Should we arbitrate life and death
at a round table or a square one?

Meanwhile, people perished,
animals died,
houses burned,
and the fields ran wild
just as in times immemorial
and less political.

TORTURES

Nothing has changed.

The body is a reservoir of pain;
 it has to eat and breathe the air, and sleep;
 it has thin skin and the blood is just beneath it;
 it has a good supply of teeth and fingernails;
 its bones can be broken; its joints can be stretched.
 In tortures, all of this is considered.

Nothing has changed.

The body still trembles as it trembled
 before Rome was founded and after,
 in the twentieth century before and after Christ.
 Tortures are just what they were, only the earth has shrunk
 and whatever goes on sounds as if it's just a room away.

Nothing has changed.

Except there are more people,
 and new offenses have sprung up beside the old ones—
 real, make-believe, short-lived, and nonexistent.
 But the cry with which the body answers for them
 was, is, and will be a cry of innocence
 in keeping with the age-old scale and pitch.

Nothing has changed.

Except perhaps the manners, ceremonies, dances.
 The gesture of the hands shielding the head
 has nonetheless remained the same.
 The body writhes, jerks, and tugs,
 falls to the ground when shoved, pulls up its knees,
 bruises, swells, drools, and bleeds.

Nothing has changed.

Except the run of rivers,
 the shapes of forests, shores, deserts, and glaciers.

The little soul roams among those landscapes,
 disappears, returns, draws near, moves away,
 evasive and a stranger to itself,
 now sure, now uncertain of its own existence,
 whereas the body is and is and is
 and has nowhere to go.

WRITING A RÉSUMÉ

What needs to be done?

Fill out the application
and enclose the résumé.

Regardless of the length of life,
a résumé is best kept short.

Concise, well-chosen facts are de rigueur.
Landscapes are replaced by addresses,
shaky memories give way to unshakable dates.

Of all your loves, mention only the marriage;
of all your children, only those who were born.

Who knows you matters more than whom you know.
Trips only if taken abroad.
Memberships in what but without why.
Honors, but not how they were earned.

Write as if you'd never talked to yourself
and always kept yourself at arm's length.

Pass over in silence your dogs, cats, birds,
dusty keepsakes, friends, and dreams.

Price, not worth,
and title, not what's inside.
His shoe size, not where he's off to,
that one you pass off as yourself.
In addition, a photograph with one ear showing.
What matters is its shape, not what it hears.
What is there to hear, anyway?
The clatter of paper shredders.

MIRACLE FAIR

The commonplace miracle:
that so many common miracles take place.

The usual miracle:
invisible dogs barking
in the dead of night.

One of many miracles:
a small and airy cloud
is able to upstage the massive moon.

Several miracles in one:
an alder is reflected in the water
and is reversed from left to right
and grows from crown to root
and never hits bottom
though the water isn't deep.

A run-of-the-mill miracle:
winds mild to moderate
turning gusty in storms.

A miracle in the first place:
cows will be cows.

Next but not least:
just this cherry orchard
from just this cherry pit.

A miracle minus top hat and tails:
fluttering white doves.

A miracle (what else can you call it):
the sun rose today at three fourteen a.m.
and will set tonight at one past eight.

A miracle that's lost on us:
the hand actually has fewer than six fingers
but still it's got more than four.

A miracle, just take a look around:
the inescapable earth.

An extra miracle, extra and ordinary:
the unthinkable
can be thought.

THE PEOPLE ON THE BRIDGE

An odd planet, and those on it are odd, too.
 They're subject to time, but they won't admit it.
 They have their own ways of expressing protest.
 They make up little pictures, like for instance this:

At first glance, nothing special.
 What you see is water.
 And one of its banks.
 And a little boat sailing strenuously upstream.
 And a bridge over the water, and people on the bridge.
 It appears that the people are picking up their pace
 because of the rain just beginning to lash down
 from a dark cloud.

The thing is, nothing else happens.
 The cloud doesn't change its color or its shape.
 The rain doesn't increase or subside.
 The boat sails on without moving.
 The people on the bridge are running now
 exactly where they ran before.

It's difficult at this point to keep from commenting.
 This picture is by no means innocent.
 Time has been stopped here.
 Its laws are no longer consulted.
 It has been relieved of its influence over the course of events.
 It has been ignored and insulted.

On account of a rebel,
 one Hiroshige Utagawa
 (a being who, by the way,
 died long ago and in due course),
 time has tripped and fallen down.

It might well be simply a trifling prank,
 an antic on the scale of just a couple of galaxies,
 let us, however, just in case,
 add one final comment for the record:

For generations, it's been considered good form here
 to think highly of this picture,
 to be entranced and moved.

There are those for whom even this is not enough.
 They go so far as to hear the rain's spatter,
 to feel the cold drops on their necks and backs,
 they look at the bridge and the people on it
 as if they saw themselves there,
 running the same never-to-be-finished race
 through the same endless, ever-to-be-covered distance,
 and they have the nerve to believe
 that this is really so.

THE END AND THE BEGINNING



1993

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SOME PEOPLE LIKE POETRY

Some people—
that means not everyone.
Not even most of them, only a few.
Not counting school, where you have to,
and poets themselves,
you might end up with something like two per thousand.

Like—
but then, you can like chicken noodle soup,
or compliments, or the color blue,
your old scarf,
your own way,
petting the dog.

Poetry—
but what is poetry anyway?
More than one rickety answer
has tumbled since that question first was raised.
But I just keep on not knowing, and I cling to that
like a redemptive handrail.

THE END AND THE BEGINNING

After every war
 someone has to tidy up.
 Things won't pick
 themselves up, after all.

Someone has to shove
 the rubble to the roadsides
 so the carts loaded with corpses
 can get by.

Someone has to trudge
 through sludge and ashes,
 through the sofa springs,
 the shards of glass,
 the bloody rags.

Someone has to lug the post
 to prop the wall,
 someone has to glaze the window,
 set the door in its frame.

No sound bites, no photo opportunities,
 and it takes years.
 All the cameras have gone
 to other wars.

The bridges need to be rebuilt,
 the railroad stations, too.
 Shirtsleeves will be rolled
 to shreds.

Someone, broom in hand,
 still remembers how it was.
 Someone else listens, nodding
 his unshattered head.

But others are bound to be bustling nearby
 who'll find all that
 a little boring.

From time to time someone still must
 dig up a rusted argument
 from underneath a bush
 and haul it off to the dump.

Those who knew
 what this was all about
 must make way for those
 who know little.
 And less than that.
 And at last nothing less than nothing.

Someone has to lie there
 in the grass that covers up
 the causes and effects
 with a cornstalk in his teeth,
 gawking at clouds.

HATRED

See how efficient it still is,
how it keeps itself in shape—
our century's hatred.

How easily it vaults the tallest obstacles.
How rapidly it pounces, tracks us down.

It's not like other feelings.
At once both older and younger.
It gives birth itself to the reasons
that give it life.

When it sleeps, it's never eternal rest.
And sleeplessness won't sap its strength; it feeds it.

One religion or another—
whatever gets it ready, in position.

One fatherland or another—
whatever helps it get a running start.

Justice also works well at the outset
until hate gets its own momentum going.

Hatred. Hatred.

Its face twisted in a grimace
of erotic ecstasy.

Oh these other feelings,
listless weaklings.

Since when does brotherhood
draw crowds?

Has compassion
ever finished first?

Does doubt ever really rouse the rabble?

Only hatred has just what it takes.

Gifted, diligent, hardworking.

Need we mention all the songs it has composed?

All the pages it has added to our history books?
All the human carpets it has spread
over countless city squares and football fields?

Let's face it:

it knows how to make beauty.

The splendid fire-glow in midnight skies.

Magnificent bursting bombs in rosy dawns.

You can't deny the inspiring pathos of ruins
and a certain bawdy humor to be found
in the sturdy column jutting from their midst.

Hatred is a master of contrast—
between explosions and dead quiet,
red blood and white snow.

Above all, it never tires
of its leitmotif—the impeccable executioner
towering over its soiled victim.

It's always ready for new challenges.

If it has to wait awhile, it will.

They say it's blind. Blind?

It has a sniper's keen sight
and gazes unflinchingly at the future
as only it can.

PARTING WITH A VIEW

I don't reproach the spring
for starting up again.

I can't blame it
for doing what it must
year after year.

I know that my grief
will not stop the green.
The grass blade may bend
but only in the wind.

It doesn't pain me to see
that clumps of alders above the water
have something to rustle with again.

I take note of the fact
that the shore of a certain lake
is still—as if you were living—
as lovely as before.

I don't resent
the view for its vista
of a sun-dazzled bay.

I am even able to imagine
some non-us
sitting at this minute
on a fallen birch trunk.

I respect their right
to whisper, laugh,
and lapse into happy silence.

I can even allow
that they are bound by love
and that he holds her
with a living arm.

Something freshly birdish
starts rustling in the reeds.
I sincerely want them
to hear it.

I don't require changes
from the surf,
now diligent, now sluggish,
obeying not me.

I expect nothing
from the depths near the woods,
first emerald,
then sapphire,
then black.

There's one thing I won't agree to:
my own return.
The privilege of presence—
I give it up.

I survived you by enough,
and only by enough,
to contemplate from afar.

MAY 16, 1973

One of those many dates
that no longer ring a bell.

Where I was going that day,
what I was doing—I don't know.

Whom I met, what we talked about,
I can't recall.

If a crime had been committed nearby,
I wouldn't have had an alibi.

The sun flared and died
beyond my horizons.
The earth rotated
unnoted in my notebooks.

I'd rather think
that I'd temporarily died
than that I kept on living
and can't remember a thing.

I wasn't a ghost, after all.
I breathed, I ate,
I walked.

My steps were audible,
my fingers surely left
their prints on doorknobs.

Mirrors caught my reflection.
I wore something or other in such-and-such a color.
Somebody must have seen me.

Maybe I found something that day
that had been lost.
Maybe I lost something that turned up later.

I was filled with feelings and sensations.
Now all that's like
a line of dots in parentheses.

Where was I hiding out,
where did I bury myself?
Not a bad trick
to vanish before my own eyes.

I shake my memory.
Maybe something in its branches
that has been asleep for years
will start up with a flutter.

No.
Clearly I'm asking too much.
Nothing less than one whole second.

MAYBE ALL THIS

Maybe all this
is happening in some lab?
Under one lamp by day
and billions by night?

Maybe we're experimental generations?
Poured from one vial to the next,
shaken in test tubes,
not scrutinized by eyes alone,
each of us separately
plucked up by tweezers in the end?

Or maybe it's more like this:
No interference?
The changes occur on their own
according to plan?
The graph's needle slowly etches
its predictable zigzags?

Maybe thus far we aren't of much interest?
The control monitors aren't usually plugged in?
Only for wars, preferably large ones,
for the odd ascent above our clump of Earth,
for major migrations from point A to B?

Maybe just the opposite:
They've got a taste for trivia up there?
Look! on the big screen a little girl
is sewing a button on her sleeve.
The radar shrieks,
the staff comes at a run.
What a darling little being
with its tiny heart beating inside it!

How sweet, its solemn
threading of the needle!
Someone cries enraptured:
Get the Boss,
tell him he's got to see this for himself!

WE'RE EXTREMELY FORTUNATE

We're extremely fortunate
not to know precisely
the kind of world we live in.

One would have
to live a long, long time,
unquestionably longer
than the world itself.

Get to know other worlds,
if only for comparison.

Rise above the flesh,
which only really knows
how to obstruct
and make trouble.

For the sake of research,
the big picture
and definitive conclusions,
one would have to transcend time,
in which everything scurries and whirls.

From that perspective,
one might as well bid farewell
to incidents and details.

The counting of weekdays
would inevitably seem to be
a senseless activity;

dropping letters in the mailbox
a whim of foolish youth;

the sign "No Walking on the Grass"
a symptom of lunacy.

NEW POEMS



1993-97

A CONTRIBUTION TO STATISTICS

Out of a hundred people
 those who always know better
 —fifty-two,
 doubting every step
 —nearly all the rest,
 glad to lend a hand
 if it doesn't take too long
 —as high as forty-nine,
 always good
 because they can't be otherwise
 —four, well maybe five,
 able to admire without envy
 —eighteen,
 suffering illusions
 induced by fleeting youth
 —sixty, give or take a few,
 not to be taken lightly
 —forty and four,
 living in constant fear
 of someone or something
 —seventy-seven,
 capable of happiness
 —twenty-something tops,
 harmless singly,
 savage in crowds
 —half at least,

cruel
 when forced by circumstances
 —better not to know
 even ballpark figures,
 wise after the fact
 —just a couple more
 than wise before it,
 taking only things from life
 —thirty
 (I wish I were wrong),
 hunched in pain,
 no flashlight in the dark
 —eighty-three
 sooner or later,
 righteous
 —thirty-five, which is a lot,
 righteous
 and understanding
 —three,
 worthy of compassion
 —ninety-nine,
 mortal
 —a hundred out of a hundred.
 Thus far this figure still remains unchanged.

AMONG THE MULTITUDES

I am who I am.

A coincidence no less unthinkable
than any other.

I could have different
ancestors, after all,
I could have fluttered
from another nest
or crawled bescaled
from under another tree.

Nature's wardrobe
holds a fair supply of costumes:
spider, seagull, field mouse.
Each fits perfectly right off
and is dutifully worn
into shreds.

I didn't get a choice either,
but I can't complain.

I could have been someone
much less separate.

Someone from an anthill, shoal, or buzzing swarm,
an inch of landscape tousled by the wind.

Someone much less fortunate,
bred for my fur
or Christmas dinner,
something swimming under a square of glass.

A tree rooted to the ground
as the fire draws near.

A grass blade trampled by a stampede
of incomprehensible events.

A shady type whose darkness
dazzled some.

What if I'd prompted only fear,
loathing,
or pity?

If I'd been born
in the wrong tribe,
with all roads closed before me?

Fate has been kind
to me thus far.

I might never have been given
the memory of happy moments.

My yen for comparison
might have been taken away.

I might have been myself minus amazement,
that is,
someone completely different.

THE SILENCE OF PLANTS

Our one-sided acquaintance
grows quite nicely.

I know what a leaf, petal, ear, cone, stalk is,
what April and December do to you.

Although my curiosity is not reciprocal,
I specially stoop over some of you,
and crane my neck at others.

I've got a list of names for you:
maple, burdock, hepatica,
mistletoe, heath, juniper, forget-me-not,
but you have none for me.

We're traveling together.
But fellow passengers usually chat,
exchange remarks at least about the weather,
or about the stations rushing past.

We wouldn't lack for topics: we've got a lot in common.
The same star keeps us in its reach.
We cast shadows based on the same laws.
We try to understand things, each in our own way,
and what we don't know brings us closer too.

I'll explain as best I can, just ask me:
what seeing with two eyes is like,
what my heart beats for,
and why my body isn't rooted down.
But how to answer unasked questions,
while being furthermore a being so totally
a nobody to you.

Undergrowth, coppices, meadows, rushes—
everything I tell you is a monologue,
and it's not you who listens.

Talking with you is essential and impossible.
Urgent in this hurried life
and postponed to never.