

## ADVENT

All my life I've been at the school of yearning  
    where the masters come and go. Early,  
the gambler from Ithaca, brine in his beard and hair,  
    stepped from his latest ship to possess  
a puzzled child and steep him in nostalgia,  
    that ache to be making the journey home.

A harper's music sent Odysseus out,  
    and brought him back at last, the strings  
touched sometimes with tenderness, but then  
    with a bowman's tension. The hovering song  
gave him, with tears, and the death of every comrade,  
    his wife and son, a ravaged father,

some acres of island, and memories hugger-mugger –  
    as, of a boar-lanced thigh, of a cup  
which but for moly would sweep away his wits,  
    of barley meal and beeswax, of the Horse  
in which he'd huddled for Troy's undoing and,  
    discreet and lovely, Nausicaa.

What could I make of it, there by another sea?  
    The swans manoeuvred, preening their sable  
on a river named for them: pods of dolphin  
    engaged the current, fluent and peaceful:  
but what I thought of was the veteran come home  
    to the figs and the fifty rows of vines.  
And then, the Florentine, who ate the salty bread  
    of those who'd shelter him to brood

on exile, with its marrings and its makings.

Beside the Arno, a log seasoned  
against his return. He, proud as he was,  
hungered for love and its transformations.

They told me, those I trusted, and were right,  
that so it went: the heart is a nest  
for nurselings making music in an air  
they barely guess at. And they said  
that he, the hankerer, caught the best of notes,  
stilling the world to hear and yearn.

It came, some of it, out of the frozen pit,  
that place of ravage, some from fire  
on the slope of changes, some from the ocean of light  
become a vast and peopled rose:  
and some, the best, from what he could not say,  
its glory putting him to silence.

First and last he was rapt at the feast of song,  
too good, he thought, for a man of fears  
and blundering heart. Nor could he clear his head  
of stars, prepotent and benign.  
In the end, at Ravenna, all he had to show,  
apart from *maestria*, was a child's wonder.

'Music at midnight' George Herbert called the thought  
of kindness done, and came to hear it

there with his little flock on Salisbury Plain.

The way that takes the town was gone –  
courtship of the buoyant, grandiloquence in Latin –  
and now he'd have it out with God,

and did, as a hearer said, in passacaglia,  
the heart always at issue, the mind  
tested for temper as he prayed afresh –  
brutish enough for Pascal, but keyed  
to what the spheres don't offer after all,  
though a breath may, beyond the stars.

Stumping along by the Nadder, praying by the book –  
soul troubled, spirit braved –  
he faced the fact that death works like a mole,  
that thoughts may be a case of knives,  
that no, the broken bones might never joy,  
the fire cower in flints to the last,

but went on hoping, as the lungs declined  
and the big heart laboured, for that land of spices,  
its savour in the nostrils: for mellowed ground,  
for a rich repining, for the orange tree,  
'that busy plant': and, all command surrendered,  
for praise continued while the music lasted.

## CAVALCADE FOR A CHILD

From a hilltop citadel – it is Jerusalem – they  
are riding south to the place of the child,  
starless now apart from the bathing sun  
which gives them all they have and are  
and colours them to life.

It's a man's world, this, except at the end. The horse-boys,  
grave as their seniors, are being inducted  
into some business requiring silence; the pages,  
their daggers worn with an air, their jackets  
a study in crimson, their curls

crimped as the season asks, appear to suppose  
that a smile would breach decorum, a wink  
subvert the whole affair. Piero the Gouty,  
who's laid out solid money for the job,  
is a hard man to amuse.

And so the enterprise is pursued – costume,  
caparison and all. Camels  
with blackamoors attending, leopard and wildcat  
for the look of the thing, ducks and dibblers,  
a falcon straddling its kill,

flash of a peacock among espaliered roses –  
they trap the whole, as do the trees,  
their arboretum clipped by angels. And there,  
no distance at all from the bankers and fixers,  
an easy ride from Herod,

are the driven three who've set it all in motion:  
Caspar, Melchior, Balthasar,  
each in a regal kit of his own, and each  
wide-eyed for wisdom, captivated  
by things as yet unseen.

In the event, they'll wind as Gozzoli draws them  
to where, set out by Lippi, on a patch  
of random flowers edged with fractured stone,  
the child is lying naked, a finger  
touching his lip in surprise,

his mother kneeling the better to wonder, hands  
barely meeting, everything stilled,  
not as one day she'll find at the bloody axle,  
but now, for a long moment, showing  
the world begin afresh.

## GREEN MAN

He's the green pick that speckles the bushfire's char,  
is crocus-leaf piercing the snow. He's a kapok,  
rearing above the Peruvian canopy, lofting  
its harpy eagle, drinking the light.  
He's glasswort, holding the mudflats, defying the salt,  
is larch come springtime, the needles flourished,  
is alder with catkins, lichen to carpet the tundra,  
is a pine in Bhutan, red oak of Durango,  
the bays of your hungry dreams.

In the scarves of wheat at the heels of oxen, or coursing  
steppe and prairie, veldt and savannah:  
bold in the squadrons of maize and its rampancy, sweet  
in the loaded canes and the plumping orchards:  
spirit indeed of the crocked berries from woods  
in Transcaucasia, of amaranth chica,  
of barleycorn, perry, metheglin: standing tall  
in mountain ash and hemlock, he's  
bowed as well in the moss.

'Death is greener than grass' they say, and he's tried it,  
pricked forever as though to fruit  
at the touch of a dark holly, but there for the seeing,  
twined perhaps on an olive's reaches,  
its rood one of his measures, its long hold  
a gift at need, its crouch and rise  
a captivation, its bearing and bearing a fashion  
of blessing come early or late, and its leaves  
silvered amidst the green.

## WATER MAN

Yes there was dreaming though he could not say  
how long it lasted. He found himself  
now in familiar waters, coasting the lake  
his friends would fish for a living, now  
in the open sea, possessed like herring or dolphin  
by unbiddable currents. He saw plankton  
bloom to clouds, could touch the holdfast of kelp,  
the bristles of krill, the fins of tang:  
lantern fish hung in the twilight zone, the vampire  
squid from hell gazed in the dark,  
black smokers vented.

‘You never enjoy the world aright till the sea  
itself floweth in your veins.’ He made  
the most of the dreamtime, still uncertain when  
it must give way to showtime. Gannets  
nested by rocky shores, mimic-blennies  
darted by coral, bowhead whales  
bobbed in polynyas, gyre and sargasso waited.  
He came to see it all as home,  
and had it much in mind when Piero caught him,  
a little clear of the Jordan, water  
blessing him on his way.

## CONTEMPLATION WITH ASHES

These, among others: Assyria's mailed archers  
and mounted spearmen, the charioteers  
drinking to devastation, Sennacherib boasting,  
    'of Elam, I cut their throats like sheep';  
Polybius, of the Roman way on storming –  
    'the purpose is to strike terror,  
the very dogs in halves'; the Langobards,  
    each broadsword sleek with lacertine figures,  
each lance of a strength to lift its wriggling target;  
    Byzantium's troopers, shocking by waves,  
and blinding all but one in a hundred prisoners.

Pity us Christ, niggards too often of pity  
    for our flesh and blood, and yours. The mind,  
sumptuous in excess, is cajoled, seduced  
    by new roads to the breaking of hearts.  
Here are the surgeons of violence: beglamour them with  
    exotic titles – jäger, hussar –  
and look away from the loppage. For samurai, fold  
    and hammer and fold the millions of layers.  
From the sealed cars, deliver trash to the bastard-  
    file of cold on the taiga, or  
to the abattoirs that live by inhalation.

Come Ash Wednesday, I'll think again of Dresden,  
the whole place become a pyre:  
and come the feast of Christ's transfiguration,  
remember Hiroshima and its lethal flash,  
a cauldron of light to try away the heart  
and leave us bones at best. St Goya,  
patron of horror, St Callot, inciser of outrage,  
stand by us now. There's no lack  
of those, your betters perhaps, who muster sweetness:  
but this side of the hanged man  
you do well, we know, to offer the bitter sponge.

## REVERIE IN LYGON STREET

I

Thirty paces from the kerbside, down a spillway,  
and you might as well be in a souk –  
not that they call it that of course, where the gate  
swings open as if by magic,  
and all's as timeless as a casino. Capped  
and shirted à la mode, minions  
are making hay, you might suppose, with produce,  
with gonfalons of paper, tubs  
devised in elvish territory, sheaths  
to blandish and beguile, metals  
worked in no earthly smithy, balls  
and bonbonniere, flasks paraded,  
the Spice Islands by the squill.

The eye, they tell us, learns by little hops,  
so good luck to the mind. I'm gawking  
now at the avocados, now at garlic,  
a sucker as ever for the cabbage in  
its ostentation, for the blushing apples to which  
the maddest George devoted a corer  
as golden as his dreams, for the jokey banana,  
for maize in spite of the Aztec blood,  
for the swank of strawberries, the almonds left behind  
as a pourboire by Tutankhamun,  
for the parsnip that doubles for Pasternak the yearner,  
for snow-peas and pineapples, the cocksure eggplant,  
and the mandrake called tomato.

Believing Him here, as in my folly I do,  
the once and risen mortal, prompts me  
to ask about the old days. Were the leeks  
as good in Galilee as the fleeing slaves  
remembered from their time in Egypt? Did  
the pomegranates delight the mouth  
as well as they did the Solomonic eye  
that culled them for his temple carvings  
and gave him glory along with God? I know,  
poor things, they hadn't the merest handful  
of paradise mix or wasabi peas, but were  
the olives up to scratch, the wine  
a sleeper for better days?

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For the canting psychopath flaunting a lousy haircut,  
books in flames were just a beginning,  
but lit the way to our kind's extermination,  
blackened heart by heart. And if,  
as we know, most of us, courtesy of the pages  
retrieved from rags or the skins of beasts  
or sodden and beaten reeds, the hectoring killer  
has comrades of a kind, the soul  
hangs at times between hope and despair, language  
bringing its wounded self before us  
to say that words are mummery in the face  
of the sword and the drone: and yet, and yet  
we know and they do not.

Into the bookstore, then, with its tangled web  
of bad news and good, its moving mirrors  
of troubled and exultant faces, its braille  
in which we finger out the senses  
gone, often, to earth in our dreams. We're not  
so different from the schoolboy Tully,  
propped in a nook, Vincenzo Foppa shows,  
to con the pages with a kind of love:  
or, on dodgy days, from Wyeth's hunter,  
the Blind Pew who swung a stick  
into and at the world. 'You can't abridge  
a melody', said Valéry, and the game's always,  
fair weather or foul,

to find the melodious thing in a book's tempest,  
its cataracts and clowning. I wonder,  
when too restless for prayer, too buckled up,  
what the one we nickname 'the Word' made  
of the Book's turbulent surfaces, its thrash  
from waste and void and a breathing presence  
where the scroll begins, to objurgations from  
one edgy prophet or another,  
to desire at large in Solomon the singer,  
to butchery and its blessing. Perhaps,  
in spite of the India paper and the gold,  
it's largely, like himself, in code,  
the melody to come.

Was Giacometti right to think our heads  
     stranger by thousands than the head of a wolf?  
 They vary as I dawdle here, the stream  
     gentled by commerce, prompted for show:  
 a dark crayon of hair to follow a jaw-line;  
     tilt of a throat in imperium's cause;  
 a bobble of laughter investing the headstrong; a twist  
     for riposte or rejection; weathervane joy;  
 a too-long brooding that's soaked into the sand;  
     masking for its own sweet sake;  
 bewildered love, if that's the thing to call it,  
     as the sun endorses noon in Carlton  
     and we try to be ourselves.

It's panoply of a kind, and the christian fool  
     blinks at its onset, charged as ever  
 with making out the vestiges of glory  
     in the drawn faces, the flashed glances,  
 the dream-swept lingerers at the crosswalk, and  
     the pavement artist with his empty hat.  
 Canetti imagined the tantrum of a thief  
     who was given everything, and I  
 can play the brat in the face of common splendours –  
     the curtain up on sunlight, the rig  
 and throb of an idling bike, corn-rows triumphant,  
     the newsprint smell of a whole childhood,  
     a buoyancy of canvas –

to no good end. 'To come to see the world  
as beauty, is the moral schooling  
of desire.' So now it's back to the slate and chalk,  
back for a while to the butchers' paper,  
to get the hang of things. It's well and good  
to give a hearing to the old notion  
of Christ as pattern for a yearning cosmos, poet  
of galaxy and cell: but here's  
the shambles of a face, which might be his,  
and might be God knows whose. In a moment  
the lights will change, the feet move, the planet  
inch as it must, and the charged heart  
wait, as it hopes, with passion.

## HEARING IT FOR THE HAND

for Jan and Helen Senbergs

'The hand is the window onto the mind', or so  
Big Immanuel thought, as he grubbed away  
beneath the starry sky. And there they are,  
a couple of lobes at arms' length,  
keeping their counsel by- night, but still adroit  
as a cartload of wise monkeys.

Back in the unkempt seasons, when he and she  
roved without so much as a fig-leaf  
and gave not a damn for connotation, they,  
plucking at nuts or in flaggy streams,  
grew dexterous, and had at their fingers' ends  
the drum on harvesting life.

Later, in Altamira or its like, did many  
regard that loyal opposer, the thumb,  
as something grateful? Without it, notes a savant,  
the hand's but an animated fish-slice,  
or a pair of forceps whose points decline to meet:  
but with it there's a thumbs-up

for devoted knappers of cobbles, for chert in slivers,  
for needle and burin and the lads on the Moon.  
No wonder we've taken to signing the work of our hands  
with the organ itself – the fingerprint seals  
of Chinese traders dead before Christ; the nailmarks  
in Assyrian bricks; engravings of creatures,

ending with an ink-touch, and 'Thomas Bewick, his mark'.

Gestures all, I suppose, and kin  
to those of the Bushmen signalling ostrich or eland  
in the hunt's silence, or a Trappist's oracular  
weavings of air. Those English bowmen, their hoicks  
of two fingers at the French a boast

that they were still un-maimed, those orators' moves  
to mime 'the liquid current of nature',  
the Indian dancing that boasts thousands of castings  
of hands and fingers – we sense in them  
that the Sage of Königsberg was right this time,  
the hand offered, the mind grasped.

But God forbid that the last word be given  
to gravitas, that old pretender:  
for here's the hand at play upon the brush,  
brisking about the painter's house  
like Smart's cat, devilling for the divine,  
a world still there for the making.

## AFTER THE IRISH

It's a known fact that breeding will break out  
in the eyes of a cat, as that moonshine  
will make a rabbit spit at a dog. It's easy  
to see a white horse in a bog,  
but hard to choose between two blind goats. A hen  
is heavy over a long distance,  
water's wasted on a drowned mouse, in winter  
the milk goes to the cows' horns.  
When the sky falls we'll all be catching larks,  
but, for one in passion's talons,  
the pigs are running through the potato garden.  
It's the losing horse that blames the saddle;  
when the cock crows, the small birds try their song;  
time and patience would bring a snail  
to Jerusalem; the sheep could eat the grass  
through a conscience or two I've known; and like  
an Irish wolf, some bark at their shadows.

As well whistle jigs to a milestone as tell  
your troubles to some, who'd swear a hole  
in an iron pot, their eyes like two burnt holes  
in a blanket – not that there's no worse  
in the North. 'There's many a sort of instrument,' said  
the man with the wooden trumpet, and a crooked  
cane makes a straight back. It's a wedge  
of itself that splits the oak, and you'll never  
plough a field by turning it over in your mind.

What's all the world to a man when his wife  
is a widow? The road to Heaven is well enough signed,  
but it's badly lit at night. The sweat of one's brow  
burns each living soul. Beware of the anger  
of a patient man; it's easy to sleep  
on another man's wound; you mustn't bolt the door  
with a boiled carrot or a spill of song.  
But arrah, live in my heart and pay no rent.

## ONE FOR PIETER BRUEGEL

No place, this, for a quiet life. Your noggin  
spins and is counter-spun as you watch  
a brace of bears, like émigré penguins, dancing  
for a gaping yokel, a piglet who's eager  
to teach the sow, a scuttling alarmist convinced  
that his backside's on fire. There's a glossy dandy  
who spins a world on his thumb, a bluffer,  
brand in one hand, water in the other:  
there's a monk who is pinning a flaxen beard on Christ  
as though in the fitness of things. A crossbow  
is bolting its quarrels over a roof that's tiled  
with pies, a Merry Andrew exults  
in the best cards and the fine weather, a daff  
is hauling a basket of sunlight outside:  
there's a would-be glover of swans, and a fox at the table.

'Every bit helps', said the mouse, and there was the ocean,  
a piddle the richer. On land, they're making  
the most of life's enigmas. They're holding a candle  
for the Devil, just in case: they're kissing  
the door-ring, speaking backwards and forwards at once,  
they're out to buffet the brickwork by head,  
or pull by twos for the longer end of a pretzel.  
A gull shaved without lather, a herring  
hung by its own gills, a couple of gamblers  
on pillory or gallows, here they are,  
exalted in folly as though with genever. Large  
as life and twice as natural, there's  
the man with toothache behind his ears, the hen-wife  
who skips the goose-egg, the cat unbelled.  
Please, can somebody help me shear my hounds?

## ROGUE POET

for Andrew Riemer

Half Mercury and half Autolycus,  
All joker in our weirdly shuffled pack,  
Voltaire's barbarian come to hustle us  
From poise into perplexity and back;  
The rubricator of life's ragged leaf,  
Expatriate cousin of Scheherazade,  
Tattler on time the witless heartless thief,  
Who bears the jeering but who takes it hard:  
You're done, they tell us, and were better gone –  
Played-out, clay-footed, bad boy of the street:  
The season calls despair and dogma on,  
Prinking and preening in the cosmic sleet.  
Old habits, though, die hard: tonight, you'll sting  
Imagination with the birth of spring.

## TASTE

*Matt. 26: 26–28*

After some weeks of compassion and of scorn  
He took a spell to pray and muse alone,  
Surprised that, early, he should feel so worn –  
The much expressed and yet the little known.

His mother's wisdom was to praise their food,  
That benediction from the hand of God,  
And so he found the coriander good  
And blessed the little broad beans in the pod.

Almonds, pistachios, mulberries, new cheese,  
He told them over as a psalmist might:  
Mustard, and lamb, the husbandry of bees,  
And pomegranate gleaming to the bite.

Well now, he thought, perhaps they'll know me best  
As bread and wine delivered with the rest.

## REHEARSAL

Upright again, fritters of mint in my fingers,  
I'm given pause in the kitchen patch  
by the cars' whine, the loud harrumph of lorries  
that round the stand on Two-Tree Hill  
and hustle past the boneyard.

I've taken leave of the Cliffs of Moher, the unsmiling  
campus guard at Georgetown, the fall  
of Richelieu's scarlet enclosed by the London gloom:  
I've watched my last candle gutter  
for dear ones, back in Paris,

sung, as with Francis, the spill of an Umbrian morning,  
each breath a gift, each glance a blessing:  
have said farewell to Bhutan of the high passes  
and the ragged hillmen, to the Basque dancers  
praising their limping fellow,

to the Square of Blood in Beijing, to the virid islands  
that speckle the Pacific acres,  
to moseying sheep in Judaeian scrub, to leopard  
and bison, a zoo for quartering, and  
to the airy stone of Chartres.

But here's the mint still on my hands. A wreath,  
so Pliny thought, was 'good for students,  
to exhilarate their minds.' Late in the course,  
I'll settle for a sprig or two –  
the savour gracious, the leaves brimmingly green –  
as if never to say die.