

SCATTERED LEAVES

RETURN

What is it in the attic among the discards
calling out my name to tell its story?
Leave everything, it says. Leave the dishes in the sink,
let the phone ring, lock the door and tell
my story, even you addicted to silence,
who has talked to trees and listened to stone,
who gave away your voice
to the stream that you might know its cool message, for the
clock keeps running and my hopes
are wrapped in yellow paper.
Turn your eyes toward me one last time, turn toward what
is hidden in the bones and blood
where songs come from
and rejoice in them.

Listen,
I am here with you,
faces lifted to the sky, arms and fingers spread,
feet planted on the ground that
feed the garden blooms
that twirl before the wind this summer day,
in hungry tongues
that long for one more song to sing, for time
that thirsts endlessly for itself,
in blood that carries on
a whispering campaign through roots deep in the soil
of your being.
Bring me your voice and I shall
fill it with poems.

AN OLD STORY

Upstairs the landlord's throwing a Christmas party
and outside the day is gray
as the face of death

Downstairs in the deserted rooms
you're going to the dogs howling
By now the walls are bare
the furnishings sold off
the phones gone dead
Nothing of what was
remains

Done with cats
done with roses
done with sex
Joy to the world
and farewell

Thus I vowed
and in an instant
chickens flew out of my mouth
and waited for the day to return and roost
on my head
leaving egg on my face
Done with women
and instantly ten thousand of them
laughed uproariously

AN OLD STORY 2

I went to find Buddha
at the court of last resorts
and someone handed me a broom

I sought enlightenment
and was told to dig spuds
and peel them too
and after that wash the pots and pans

I didn't mind
the weather felt fine
for here was the good life
I'd been searching for

Show me the truth I said
They told me to sit
and so I sat I sat I sat
The seasons blew
around my head
and whistled between my ears

Ah the simple life
The leaves blew away
I climbed the mountain exulting
free from all entanglements
Manjushri swung the wisdom sword
that said forget it

One soft eve
a knock sounded on my door
Would I care to take a stroll
The flowers were heavenly
at this time of the year

ZAZEN

in the dark before dawn
we come one by one silently
wrapped in black robes
to settle like crows on our cushions
folding our knees and hands
I count my breath on the outbreath
one two three four
staring at the floor in the dim light
the far-off sounds of the tide
rising and falling
five six seven
Dreams memories desires
eight nine ten
Someone coughs and another sneezes
Then the stillness again
and the probing fingers of the cold begin
Where am I?
I lose count and start over
one two three four
You can't find Buddha
so stop looking
You can't lose Buddha
so stop worrying
I look I worry
eight nine ten
Half here and half there
dimly vaguely
the ringing in my head

BACK IN TOWN

You want to climb the steps
some night and view the city
from the roof, it's quite a sight, he said.
So I did that and he was right.
The downtown lights were worth
writing home about except I was home if home is where you hang
your hat except I don't wear a hat.
I wear a watch cap to cover this shaved pate.

Ah the city.

Twenty years exactly since I left here
and coming from our mountain monastery after
such a long time gone it was a kind of shock at first.
So I have my smoke and watch the lights,
the building lights and moving traffic lights
and the floating lights of jets above
the glow and glitter of the metropolis,
the din from the streets outside in my ears.
Well, I wanted to come here and here I am.
Only I knew I'd have to come to terms one day,
have to test myself, see if I've learned anything these many years away
sitting on that round black cushion, have to face
the world I'd left behind and find out
if mine really are gift-bestowing hands
among the many and the one here on the ledge in edge city.

PRACTICE PERIOD

Wind coming over the mountain
brings rain showers today pasting
the last few leaves to the windowpane
Black robes under black umbrellas
move in pairs along the muddy road
Hey there who're you when you change
from street clothes into those vestments?
From straitjacket to shroud, no?

Me, I still can't stand the taste of gruel
My boots gummed with tar, my hands reek
of kerosene. Sore back and aching bones
yet I'm still in love with the momentary gesture
of things

Grumble and grin.
Summer's but a dry wishbone.
Dark shadows linger all day in the canyon
as winter comes on.

The three stooges named greed hate and delusion
still split my sides and roll me in the aisle.

I can't tell whether I'm laughing or crying
half the time with these clown Buddhas.

SCATTERED LEAVES

I cannot recall a time I was not here
or it was not now, this I that can't be found
in the now that can't be bound.

Breathless I am born, deathless I die.

The rain lets up and I go out for an hour of solitude
to taste the weather,
traipsing up the road through the valley shadows,
ankle-deep in fallen leaves.

I have met Karuna Yin.
She plucked my life with her smile.
She carried me here in her arms.
Now the mountains are her arms
and the sun is her smile,
even if my grunts and groans are what you hear from me.

REAL ZEN STUDENTS HAVE DISHPAN HANDS

Wood smoke scents the air.

The mountain is wrapped to its chin in mist.

Left for the day to my own devices

I wander at ease along the stream,

humming a snatch of *Time after Time*.

The pictures in my mind

keep changing from light to dark and back again.

I play at being

Han Shan and his like even though I know I am no holy fool.

Don't even ask who I am, now this, now that, clean and dry one moment,

sopping wet and muddy the next.

HOPE COTTAGE

We've made it our hermitage
I climb to it nearly every day
spent twelve winter nights alone in it
came with Ryokan Hakuin and Whalen
in my backpack

I want to be alone

Blustery days hilltop blown

Below it Green Gulch shimmers
in a golden haze at sundown
Eucalyptus groves gardens and fields
running to the edge of the ocean

It's also called The Bird House
perched like a concrete bunker
at the edge of a cliff amid six Monterey pine
Two neighborhood red-tail hawks swing by
for a look-see while I make wordplay
and talk aloud to the sky

Hope named by our benefactor
for his late wife
whose ashes lie scattered under the thistles
out back behind the fence-gate
I bow that way nine times
Hope not a Buddhist term as such
but I take her to heart anyhow

The teapot whistles on the burner
while I pile firewood beside the door
The twilight thickens
night comes on
I think of faces long gone
like vapor trails vanishing
and wait silently for the ghost of hope

ARE YOU READY?

ready at last to stop
shaking a fist at the sky
and the passing traffic
drop your heavy bag
empty your laden pockets
stop, breathe, sit
and let yourself cook
until you've smoked out
all the bitter taste
and are ready to
be chewed on by
the ten thousand
laughing mouths
of this present moment

BD (Bodhidharma)

Old BD sat nine years before a wall
That barbarian
Cut off his eyelids to stay awake
Read the book that claimed it's all Mind
ALL mind the whole works
What a trip
Emperor Wu tests him about it
BD scowls and turns the tables on him
Nothing holy
Vast emptiness
Who am I? Don't know
Leaves the Emperor scratching his head
Splits the scene
Crosses the river
Stares at the wall
Some say he walked home over the mountains
leaving one sandal behind in the snow

Nowadays it's different
This barbarian says
Nine years before the wall
Who am I? Don't know
Am told You need therapy

“IF ONLY”

yearns the heart
but for what or whom?
You merely name the form
and cannot touch the emptiness

The rain lets up and I go out
for an hour alone to taste the weather
walking through the valley shadows
ankle-deep in scattered leaves

I can't recall a time when I wasn't here
or when it wasn't now
This / that can't be found
in this *now* that can't be bound

CALL IT WHAT YOU LIKE

Call it monkey mind
swinging from branch to branch
through the tangled jungle.

Call it mouse mind
emerging from the woodwork
sniffing out the crumbs

Call it elephant mind
moving weight gracefully
trumpeting its presence

Call it butterfly mind
flitting among garden flowers
delicately

Call it shark mind
knifing along
with open jaws

Call it what you like
but know this
you there
just food for thought
eating up your life

CONFESSION

Having renounced the world
he comes down off the mountain
and does not spare himself
in working for the common good.

Who, me? Was Celine right?
Common good a self-contradiction?

Fifty-seven ways to help the homeless
I read up on the subject
Maybe I ought to begin with myself
Don't look at me like that
I'm not ready yet to sleep in doorways
trembling under stars
all my practice notwithstanding

That monk
was it Daitio?
years living under a bridge
with beggars
defender of the weak
perfecting his practice of the formless self

And Jesus out there with them
giving his cloak away
getting locked up for vagrancy
beaten up in jail

I'm hiding in my room tonight
have stuffed cotton in my ears
pulled down the shades
and crawled under the covers
biting my lips.

THE USUAL SUSPECTS

Yesterday they got Basho
They already as you know
picked up Hanshan, Milarepa and Li Po
and Lao-tsu that old coot
they put away long ago
Bodhidharma has been arrested too
charged with illegal entry
But yesterday
damn it all
Yesterday they got Basho
for writing haiku on a restroom wall.

A VARIETY OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

You must sidestep to ultimate reality
say K
Even if you drop the incense stick you still pick it up
says T
Fantastic says G
He gave up his hair but not his girlfriend
says K
Corrupt the youth of America before they corrupt you
says D

Write it down
All at once we're having a party
The winter rains hav* started
The faces of the two young woman are as clear as a day in June
We sit half-lotus on zafu
talking about who moved and who sat like a wall
What's there to be said?
asks G
Four heads nod in agreement
I glance sidelong

The time she and I have spent alone
together
you could put in a thimble and
it would still rattle around
Write it down
Don't exaggerate and don't diminish

The rain lets up and my guests depart
Alone again in the sudden silence
the table lamp and tea cups
The hard corners of my mouth
softened

Crazy
Fantastic
Write it down
Sidestep
Pick it up
Don't move

BODHISATTVA

Who can say in what way or form the Bodhisattva comes?

The one that saves all beings

large or small or in between

before she saves herself

He may drive a bus

She may work in a greasy spoon

It may be you or me but not when

we're consciously trying

It's the little kid on thin ice

pulling his roommate from the freezing water

where he's fallen in

But mostly my friend it's you as you sit there staring

at your hands in anger or grief

lust or fear

not to mention despair

Each given the room to be what each one is

totally

before melting like a snowflake in the warmth of your

accepting heart

FULL MOON CEREMONY

They're inside with the incense and candles
chanting Buddhist vows

I'm over here scribbling words set to
the incessant drumbeat of my heart

They're chanting and bowing together
in one body like a family affair

I'm brewing tea and fantasy
slipping in and out like a cat

They're touching their heads to the floor
taking refuge in the three treasures

I'm studying the odd shapes of my toes
as they wiggle on the kitchen floor

They're pressing their palms together
vowing to save all beings from suffering

I'm having a smoke on the garden bench
while gazing at the night sky

The full moon reminds me now of a golf ball
admired by the masses as a part of national pride

I must confess that I take refuge in the poet
in poetry and in the company of poets

TURNING SIXTY

Early this morning around two a.m. I hear this gentle tap on my hut door
get up and open it and there stands Jesus I swear
Christ I say you look awful c'mon in
He comes in and collapses in a chair
and says It's terrible out there
war and more war I can't take it any more
You look like you could use a rest I say
If you like you can stay here and take my bed
I'll sleep on the floor
You're a prince he says and tosses back his long hair
Say he adds you wouldn't happen to have a
little bedtime nip around here
would you
No problem I tell him and fetch it from
a rubber boot where I keep it out of harm's way
He takes it neat right from the bottle
and so do I and we toast an end
to greed hate and delusion and he's soon
snoring away curled up on the bunk
and I am having a party of one
It's not just any old night Jesus shows up on your
doorstep needing a helping hand
from a brother cleric
but then again it's not every day you turn sixty years old
and at this age you've
earned a miracle or two I say
so hey

ENCOUNTER OF THE THIRD KIND

Two rings in her nose
dressed in dark wiccan clothes
she sulks along the trash-can alleyways
a black cat at her heels
She'll tell you how they took her away in
their space ship
and did weird things to her
and the way that feels.
She'll explain the scorpio tattooos
and how she knows the code and secret arts
and she will swear that when her life's
task is done on this sad earth
she'll return to heaven in glory and pure light
I can call toll-free any time I want to
she says
because matter is just a denser level of vibration
tough on human flesh
I am Pallas Athena she says and what's found
wanting in my scale I'll chop off
with my sword
No immunity or impunity
The authors of graffiti have gone to sea
Her eyes burn in a face blanched dry
You can almost feel them touching your scars
here in the dark of the year when the moon is down

END OF DAY

Hulking mountains group around
the waning day
The pungent smell of sun-warmed pine
lingers in the cooling air
Straw hills remind me of loaves of fresh bread
A bumble bee droines around a clump of
of closed-up poppies

I sit on a rock smoothed round
by the ages and wait for your hand
on my shoulder though I know
you'll not ever come this way again
The twisted smile and beckoning finger
Such senseless heartache

From across the creek a woman's
laughter lilts through the dusk
I pull the shades of evening close
around me
making my way back along the narrow path
we once came by
void of everything now
but my footsteps

ON GETTING *THE ABYSMAL* TWICE IN A ROW

How you feel is less important
than what you do about it
So says the I-ching

Learning demands a readiness for pain
but don't make pain the game plan
Weeds push up the sidewalk tenaciously
The Udumbara Flower I thought extinct
blooms in the span of a single breath
Or does it?

Listen. The only failure is the failure to love
Yet at the crucial moment I always forget

Flow like water around the obstacles says the oracle

If you don't like these words
stop reading

My wallet went through the wash
A shopping list reads
mysteriously
Cling peaches for bull

I climbed the mountain to view the spring flowers
but the mountain hasn't heard
that spring has come

There are no mistakes
just bad typing

ON THE WAY TO SOMEWHERE ELSE

Alone in someone else's house
standing at the picture window
with folded arms at dusk

Remember when there was a place
you once called home
familiar footsteps at the door
her key turning in the lock

How many places
have you passed through
on the way to somewhere else
How often have you pressed
your forehead against
a cold windowpane
the party over
the guests departed
the fresh graves filled
the wilted flowers picked at
by the wind
passing through

ON YOUR DYING DAY

Now

when the house of cards folds
when cigarettes taste like blood
when your savior comes by
and tells you to get lost
when another stands up and steals your life
when positive and negative have a child with two heads
when your bonus includes an incinerated city
when the doctor tells you your future's been mislaid
when words die before you open your mouth
and carnivals sink into the sea and friends send you hate mail
and all your schemes rent rooms in cheap hotels
and drink themselves into a stupor
when the revered are wakened at midnight
only to be shot at dawn
when every hope is hatched stillborn
and there is no way out
and you brace for life on a bed of nails

now right now
show me who you are
on this your dying day

A SIMPLE-MINDED SERMON

Who or what is this
that stands or sits or stretches out
before the mind's eye
I'll tell you flat out a nobody
a nothing
a traveler returned empty-handed
from a trip to the bottom of time
undone
unannounced
nameless purposeless non-abiding
a ghost
a fool
a pain in the butt
pure nonsense
voiceless hot air
a walking joke
a savior
a friend
a lover
a hero
a rascal

One who'll never come
and will never leave
one who stays too long
or not long enough
one who takes solemn vows
and breaks them all
and is broken by them
the one who listens or doesn't
the one who acts
the one who waits
the one willing to be
all things

The human one

the one you already are
the one you can never know
the one in the center
and the one on the edge

dreamer or viusionary
angel or monster
the sentient being
endlessly lost and found

A PAUSE BETWEEN TWO BREATHS

A smell of spring rain
coming through the open
window

The voices of
women in the garden
A whiff of damp earth
like a forgotten promise

Give me back the life

I have lost it says

The afternoon shadows
on the bedroom wall

my hands clasped across my chest

They've opened my heart
and sewn it up again

A heart stopped cold then refreshed

Imagine

Call out the name from any year

It's the same the world over

Barbarians at the gate

the wolf at the door

Burning cities in the morning paper

beside the coffee cup

For whom does this heart beat?

What song can save the ravaged land?

Once back there among the ruins

taking vows

turning up our palms

The names of the beloved