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Poems

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Site/Sight

The black shadow of a submarine
passes through the strait, cutting
a straight line across ragged, green,
foam-capped waves. The depths
from which such creatures must come
to invade our lives with their dark imprint!
Like subterranean angels who have fallen
upward into the sunlight, where they lie
at rest or glide grimly upon the surface:

cancerous moles, the compensation
for betrayed grace, arising like the changing
lines on a palm that come to light one
day and remain etched there, the marks
of a realization that can't be erased
or sent back into the darkness beneath
coarse skin, into the smoking caverns
of the blood from which they were born,
or dreamed up, in ordered lines of cells,

by minds that spend much of their time
formulating the positions we will
take against enemies, the other selves
that must remain invisible to be real.
May all our fears one day be revealed
as the smooth, metal lines of a machine
that slips along, a half-submerged womb
stocked with warheads, death's flags
waving before our eyes, finally seen.

Istanbul, October 29, 1997

My Father's Operation

He'd watched his life washing away
with topsoil down a deep gully
cut by the hardest rains seen in
some fifteen years in the county.

But it was long after those rains
when he learned that an operation
would be needed; and no explanation
could be sufficient preparation for

a catheter worked into a prostate.
There was more than the obvious pain
wrecking him, or the expectation
shaking him to tears before the fact;

they were nothing much compared to
other fears like long-rooted weeds
grown too deeply in for any act
performed by any person to affect.

A part of him was lost on the day
I walked in saw his large frame
shuddering on the bed, and I knew that
he was as afraid of life as I was then

and his own father had once been,
who had died after refusing to have
an operation, an appendectomy, until
it was too late. And I could only

pretend that it was just another day,
turn away from the work of rain,
and stand hard against my own life's
oncoming days of deluge and erosion.

The New World

That was it, the new world:
a blue-green bowling ball with white swirls
sitting on top of a sports display
in a store in the Gulfway Shopping Center.
My cousin and I had walked there from his house

after first experiencing the cosmic, rush-hour roar
of traffic passing overhead on the freeway
on that first day of my first visit to the city.

Of the rest of the city on that day
or on any other before I moved there many years later,
nothing else really mattered that was all.

I listen to İstanbul Today

with my eyes open. I see
that you have a lovely throat,
but your voice is hoarse,
choked with its noisy traffic
of indecipherable words that
run together and apart, in
endless conflict and confusion,
above and beside the constant
flow, the whispered rhapsody
that passes by almost silently,
winding through your heart.

Now I listen to you İstanbul,
with my eyes closed, and feel
your broken soul inside me,
aching, so deep that I don't
know where you are or where
I am expect that I am inside
you somewhere, sitting alone
with my eyes closed, listening.

I open my eyes again and see
you there, outside and around me:
in angular house and apartment
building roofs that jut out
and upward through a blanket
of trees embroidered with spires,
rock walls, and domes, across
the smooth folds of hills that
slope up from the shoreline,
pink and blue and grey and green
in the late afternoon of a day

that I have spent as if I were
lost, as if I were nowhere.

I listen to you and watch you,
feel your soft light and roar
fuse inside me now as I speak.
And as you speak to me
and I to you, we meet each
other here, in these lines, utter
a few brief words in greeting,
“İyi akşamlar,” and slowly pass,
each going along on our own
way through darkening streets,
as night wakes inside us again
its dream of a million lights
turned on, reflected off the sky
to water, through electric air.

I hear your laughter and your
cries echoing everywhere,
and I see myself through
your eyes tonight, İstanbul,
with endless yearning, your
own desire to live and die
clashing inside me, but contained
and refined to a discordant
song: Yours that I see and
hear now in the glittering dark
beyond my open window,
from which I turn my ear,
close my eyes, and try again,
hopelessly, to return to you...

With apologies and thanks to Orhan Veli

The Fallen: Two Viewpoints

1.

When I meet you I feel

I have lost
everything,

even my name,
to you

who know and care

nothing
about how I feel,

why or what,

passing by
cold, nonchalant,

as though you don't even remember

who I am
but only who

I am not.

2.

I know you must
know how I feel.

When we accidentally meet
sometimes
on a sidewalk
or in a hall,

you must suddenly
feel
something
heavy inside

yourself
fall.

If Words

If words are of any use, then
the glue on the spines of books
that flakes off like yellow
fishscales will also have a place
long after the pages have fallen
out and left a multifoliate corpus
of decay cast out on a trash
heap, the itching sore of a landfill
far enough past the city limits
to be removed from day-to-day
memory, but for an inhabitant
there, who might stumble
upon a small mound like a papery
ant-hill and look down to see
an inscription cleanly preserved
kicked open to air, saying
something like this: "In memory
of the good days we've passed
as neighbors. Best wishes in your
new home in that far-off city.
When you read this I'll be with
you there." And the one who's
broken in on this reverie will
just for a moment see himself
in the neatly bound book of
his life, its ordered days like
regularly turned pages, until
the final one at last arrives
to consolidate the whole com-
plex of motifs and themes into
one resolution so grand that its
long-anticipated meaning is
more than just a summation
of half-remembered parts.

On the Site of a Future Parking Lot

I remember when a woman who
cared for her flowers lived there.
She cultivated them out front beside
the sidewalk edging on the curb,
as if no one would dare to step

into their narrow bed carved out
of the stoney lot the house stood on.

Carefully she would add the finely
sifted dirt and water them daily.
I'd see her out there almost every
day when I walked to the store
I remember now, as delicately pretty
As a type of thin-stemmed domestic.

It may have been she who planted
this solitary rose beside the back
door stoop, in its weedy, rocky
spot that might once have even
been a bed for flowers. And when
she left she took with her the care
that kept the flowers blooming so
brightly where I would have never
imagined anything lovely to grow.

Well, the rose plant is still here,
one of the last survivors of that time.
It appears to be as shy as she was
who smiled at me sometimes, but
only rarely spoke as she bent over
the tender green shoots, as careful
as any young mother might ever be.

Today I feel privileged to have
been allowed to see the budding
of this yellow rose with rust-red
edges, a common one, which yet
so rarely opens itself up to the world,
living on alone in its inhospitable
surroundings, without a ray of hope
under this blazing white city sky,
as one who continues to suffer its
life daily that it may thrive wildly
on beauty alone, as if its life were
still feeding on the care of one
who is no longer there.

It reminds me
of others I have heard of and known,

those roses without gardens
or gardeners, who have suffered
and bloomed only long enough to
be briefly commented on before
another age came along to claim
and overcome them, burying them
under the surface of a world moving
on, yet staying forever the same.

I remember that the wild weren't
always the wild nor the tame the tame;
they only become as they finally
are known in memory, after time's
grader has pushed over them, again
crushing and leveling them into one
blank face to bear the world's desire
and record its interminable failure.