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SADNESS AND HAPPINESS

(1975)

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I

The Time Of Year, The Time Of Day

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Poem About People

The jaunty crop-haired graying
Women in grocery stores,
Their clothes boyish and neat,
New mittens or clean sneakers,

Clean hands, hips not bad still,
Buying ice cream, steaks, soda,
Fresh melons and soap—or the big
Balding young men in work shoes

And green work pants, beer belly
And white T-shirt, the porky walk
Back to the truck, polite; possible
To feel briefly like Jesus,

A gust of diffuse tenderness
Crossing the dark spaces
To where the dry self burrows
Or nests, something that stirs,

Watching the kinds of people
On the street for a while—
But how love falters and flags
When anyone's difficult eyes come

Into focus, terrible gaze of a unique
Soul, its need unlovable: my friend
In his divorced schoolteacher
Apartment, his own unsuspected

Paintings hung everywhere,
Which his wife kept in a closet—
Not, he says, that she wasn't
Perfectly right; or me, mis-hearing

My rock radio sing my self-pity:
"The Angels Wished Him Dead"—all
The hideous, sudden stare of self,
Soul showing through like the lizard

Ancestry showing in the frontal gaze
Of a robin busy on the lawn.
In the movies, when the sensitive
Young Jewish soldier nearly drowns

Trying to rescue the thrashing
Anti-semitic bully, swimming across
The river raked by nazi fire,
The awful part is the part truth:

Hate my whole kind, but me,
Love me for myself. The weather
Changes in the black of night,
And the dream-wind, bowling across

The sopping open spaces
Of roads, golf-courses, parking lots,
Flails a commotion
In the dripping treetops,

Tries a half-rotten shingle
Or a down-hung branch, and we
All dream it, the dark wind crossing
The wide spaces between us.

The Time Of Year, The Time Of Day

One way I need you, the way I come to need
Our custom of speech, or need this other custom
Of speech in lines, is to alleviate
The weather, the time of year, the time of day.

I mean for instance the way the dusk in late
Winter or early spring recalls adolescence:
The pity of my comical unease
And vague depression on the long walk home

From the grim school through washed-out extra
daylight
And the yellow light that waited in kitchen windows,
Daydreaming victories on the long parades
Of artificial brick and bare hydrangea.

But how cold in retrospect the afternoon
And evening even in July could seem,
Cold heralding that now those very hours

Are on the way, the very hours which one

Had better use, which may be what it is
About the time of year and the time of day,
Their burden of a promise but a promise
Limited, that sends folk huddling to their bodies

Or kitchens as colonizers of the day
And of the year, rough settlers who throughout
The stunning winter couple in a fury
To fill the brown width of their tillable plains.

Ceremony For Any Beginning

Against weather, and the random
Harpies—mood, circumstance, the laws
Of biography, chance, physics—
The unseasonable soul holds forth,
Eager for form as a renowned
Pedant, the emperor's man of worth,
Hereditary arbiter of manners.

Soul, one's life is one's enemy.
As the small children learn, what happens
Takes over, and what you were goes away.
They learn it in sardonic soft
Comments of the weather, when it sharpens
The hard surfaces of daylight: light
Winds, vague in direction, like blades

Lavishing their brilliant strokes
All over a wrecked house,
The nude wallpaper and the brute
Intelligence of the torn pipes.

Therefore when you marry or build
Pray to be untrue to the plain
Dominance of your own weather, how it keeps

Going even in the woods when not
A soul is there, and how it implies
Always that separate, cold
Splendidness, uncouth and unkind—
On chilly, unclouded mornings,
Torrential sunlight and moist air,
Leafage and solid bark breathing the mist.

Waiting

When the trains go by
The frozen ground shivers
Inwardly like an anvil.

The sky reaches down
Stiffly into the spaces
Among houses and trees.

A wisp of harsh air snakes
Upward between glove
And cuff, quickening

The sense of the life
Elsewhere of things, the things
You touched, maybe, numb

Handle of a rake; stone
Of a peach; soiled
Band-Aid; book, pants

Or shirt that you touched
Once in a store . . . less
The significant fond junk

Of someone's garage, and less
The cinder out of your eye—
Still extant and floating

In Sweden or a bird's crop—
Than the things that you noticed
Or not, watching from a train:

The cold wide river of things,
Going by like the cold
Children who stood by the tracks

Holding for no reason sticks
Or other things, waiting
For no reason for the trains.

December Blues

At the bad time, nothing betrays outwardly the harsh
findings,
The studies and hospital records. Carols play.

Sitting upright in the transit system, the widowlke women
Wait, hands folded in their laps, as monumental as bread.

In the shopping center lots, lights mounted on cold
standards
Tower and stir, condensing the blue vapour

Of the stars; between the rows of cars people in coats walk
Bundling packages in their arms or holding the hands of
children.

Across the highway, where a town thickens by the tracks
With stores open late and creches in front of the churches,

Even in the bars a businesslike set of the face keeps off
The nostalgic pitfall of the carols, tugging. In bed,

How low and still the people lie, some awake, holding the
carols
Consciously at bay, Oh Little Town, enveloped in unease.

Discretions Of Alcibiades

First frost is weeks off, but the prudent man
With house-plants on his front porch marks the season
And moves the potted *figus* back indoors

While windows can be open for a while.
(The plant prefers a gradual transition.)
—The kid who did his homework, washed his face

And never wore tight pants, kept cherry bombs
And nasty photos in his briefcase (think:
A seventh-grader with a briefcase)—Hantman,

In Student Council with his red-hot bag:
His picture of a lady on all fours,
A Great Dane on her back, was not for sale.

And though he may have sold a bomb or two,
And must have set some off, I like to think
He preferred, like Presidents, their deep reserve.

Speaking of gradual transitions, “plant
Prefers” of course is only an expression.
You might say that the plant prefers to die,
Or wishes it were home, in Borneo,
Preferring never to have seen a window.
The stars are similar: “The wheeling Bear,
One white eye on the Pleiads, rolls another
At glowering Orion.” Autumn stars.
On this first chilly dusk, a furry bat,
Warm-blooded, dips and flutters in the sky.
(Some constellations might be called, “The Bat.”)
The roles are arbitrary too. The man
Who sleeps with Socrates and Leontes’ wife,
Who knocks the cocks from his own effigies,
Or not, simply prefers—to use another
Expression—to hide his briefcase in a bomb.
Consider gods and heroes, how they merge:
(I speak as one believing in the gods,
Especially in quick, reflective Hermes,
So sensitive and practical—like a thief,
Or like long-suffering, shrewd Odysseus).
Apollo, sullen and glamorous obverse
Of Hermes, shrouds himself in dark, or shines,
Like bold Achilles in his tent—or out,

As he prefers. All one. Tithonus, too,
And Alcibiades, balling Lady Luck
Until she dried him up. When people say

“How was your summer?” who is there alive
Who wouldn’t like to change sides, go to Sparta
Like Alcibiades, cut your hair, live clean . . .

And then knock up the king’s wife on the sly.
That’s where the inner briefcase is revealed:
He hoped his heir would be the King of Sparta—

More screwing with Fortuna, man with goddess . . .
From a god’s point of view, it is perhaps
Disgusting, if exciting in a way,

Like a dog doing a lady from behind.
The sundry dogs from along the road prefer
To conduct ferocious gang-fucks in a field:

Dogs Only, in the end-of summer fest.
But people, on Cape Cod, the Costa Brava,
Borneo, emulate gods and goddesses:

Rubbing their skin with oil, they sun it brown
Until they all are Spaniard, Jew or Greek—
Wear sandals; ply their boat; keep simple house

Cooking red meat or fish on open fires;
Market for salt; and dance to tinkly music.

Tennis

TO HOWARD WILCOX

I. The Service

The nerve to make a high toss and the sense
Of when the ball is there; and then the nerve
To cock your arm back all the way, not rigid

But loose and ready all the way behind
So that the racket nearly or really touches
Your back far down; and all the time to see

The ball, the seams and letters on the ball
As it seems briefly at its highest point
To stop and hover—keeping these in mind,

The swing itself is easy; forgetting cancer,
Or panic learning how to swim or walk,
Forgetting what the score is, names of plants,

And your first piece of ass, you throw the racket
Easily through Brazil, coins, mathematics
And *haute cuisine* to press the ball from over

And a slight slice at two o'clock or less,
Enough to make it loop in accurately
As, like a fish in water flicking itself

Away, your mind takes up the next concern
With the arm, ball, racket still pressing down
And forward and across your obedient body.

II. Forehand

Straightforwardness can be a cruel test,
A kind of stagefright threatening on the cold
And level dais, a time of no excuses.

But think about the word "*stroke*," how it means
What one does to a cat's back, what a brush
Does through a woman's long hair. Think about

The racket pressing, wiping, guiding the ball
As you stay on it, dragging say seven strings
Across the ball, the top edge leading off

To give it topspin. Think about the ball
As a loaf of bread, you hitting every slice.
Pull back the racket well behind you, drop it

And lift it, meeting the ball well out in front
At a point even with your left hip, stroking
To follow through cross-court. The tarnished coin

Of "follow through," the cat, the loaf of bread,
"Keep your eye on the ball," the dull alloy
Of homily, simile and coach's lore

As maddening, and as helpful, as the Fool
Or Æsop's *Fables*, the coinage of advice:
This is the metal that is never spent.

III. Backhand

Here, panic may be a problem; and in the clench
From back to jaw in panic you may come
Too close and struggling strike out with your arm,

Trying to make the arm do everything,
And failing as the legs and trunk resist.
All of your coinages, and your nerve, may fail . . .

What you need is the Uroborus, the serpent
Of energy and equilibrium,
Its tail between its jaws, the female circle

Which makes it easy: all is all, the left
Reflects the right, and if you change the grip
To keep your hand and wrist behind the racket

You suddenly find the swing is just the same
As forehand, except you hit it more in front
Because your arm now hangs in front of you

And not behind. You simply change the grip
And with a circular motion from the shoulder,
Hips, ankles, and knees, you sweep the inverted swing.

IV. Strategy

Hit to the weakness. All things being equal
Hit crosscourt rather than down the line, because
If you hit crosscourt back to him, then he
Can only hit back either towards you (crosscourt)
Or parallel to you (down the line), but never
Away from you, the way that you can hit
Away from him if he hits down the line.
Besides, the net is lowest in the middle,
The court itself is longest corner-to-corner,
So that a crosscourt stroke is the most secure,
And that should be your plan, the plan you need
For winning—though only when hitting from the
baseline:

From closer up, hit straight ahead, to follow
The ball to net; and from the net hit shrewdly,
To get him into trouble so he will hit

An error, or a cripple you can kill.
If he gets you in trouble, hit a lob,
And make it towering to make it hard

For him to smash from overhead and easy
For you to have the time to range the backcourt,
Bouncing in rhythm like a dog or seal

Ready to catch an object in mid-air
And rocking its head—as with your plan in mind
You arrange yourself to lob it back, and win.

V. Winning

Call questionable balls his way, not yours;
You lose the point but have your concentration,
The grail of self-respect. Wear white. Mind losing.

Walk, never run, between points: it will save
Your breath, and hypnotize him, and he may think
That you are tired, until your terrible

Swift sword amazes him. By understanding
Your body, you will conquer your fatigue.
By understanding your desire to win

And all your other desires, you will conquer
Discouragement. And you will conquer distraction
By understanding the world, and all its parts.