

Cartes Postales



Poems written in France, September-October 2008

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Le cahier

Why is it so easy
So necessary
To sow this wirebound field
With stupid seed?

When I am home the brain
Stirs thickly as a drink
The fish do not plash
In bright coils.

But here among the briars
Where life is not on trial
We carefully document
Every odd moment.



Cartes postales

This is just to say
I bought the most beautiful cards
On my trip with Rachel
Pictures of the Roman theater
And the lighthouse in the proud harbor

But I was only gone three weeks
And the first week I was too confused
And the second week I never saw the Poste
And the third week I thought, hell
I'll beat the postcards home

One day I saw in the rearview mirror
The ancient city of Carcassone
Squatting on a hilltop like a soft turban
My eyes beheld the glory
Thinking of you



Les sangliers

The wild boars of the hilltops
Venture down at night
Attracted to the perfume
Of cantaloupe and squash
Stealthy of snout and grunting opinion
They scour the sand for fallen grapes
And when they gaze bloody-eyed
At the moon
They bristle in their beauty



'Les cryptoportiques'

(a subterranean market in Arles, built during Roman times)

These are the stations of the scourge
the pillar where the spirit spurts

The cathedral embedded in the mine
has been silent now for some time

The cobblestones are always damp
From the place where stalagmites stand

There the cockroach Orson Welles
scrambles over a hill of shells

There the bazaar of shiny foil
lamps sputtering their last drops of oil

Dank as the dungeon and damp as a cave
No swinging ball of lead can raze

There the architect led on a leash
Drawn into darkness like a beast

There the hippodrome's flaking hoar
and sawdust and horse piss and hair

There is your empire, sunken and gone
It ripples like a pebble in your palm

Birds

They descended from dinosaurs,
they could have ruled the earth,

and it would have been us skittering
when ever we saw them coming

but something happened and now
they never give us a chance

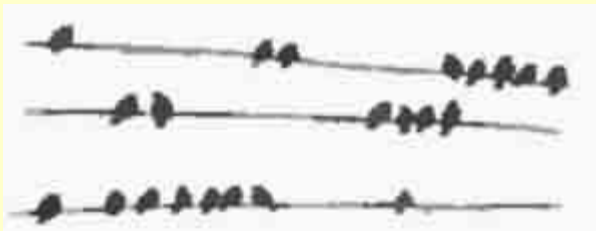
post-traumatic stress disorder taught them
we will do what we did to the chickens

who once were a noble feathered breed
but now reside in a protein matrix

I want to say hey little birdies, learn
to make a slight distinction between people

who stuff your feathers in the grill
and those of the Francis of Assisi stripe

Take a chance on mankind, or on men
there are those who just want to be friends



Old Girlfriends

I'm not supposed to but I think of them
and not the way they are now, wise and complicated,
but in the daffy way it was joyful to please me
when we were young and things were possible.

What a blessing their kindness was, loving me.
The future stretching like airplane glue.
Me and them, all living in a big house together,
Thrilled for all time by one another's beauty.

I want to pick each one up in turn and spin her
And look into her eyes and say thank you
For thinking I was someone worth contemplating,
That gift of confiding, which will never be ash.

Instead it gleams like a merit badge in my heart,
This one thought she saw something in the man.
This one said, he could be a friend for the duration,
This one, we knew and were known, and it was OK.



Cloth Napkin

rachel says my
gosh this is
a fancy place

the snails
so warm
and buttery

also ironic
how fleeting
is their taste

-



The Rapture

Walking with Rachel,
We detect a fragrance
So sweet and so intense

Like honey, lilac and swirled violets
We look at one another
With a look of deepest longing

Until we step into a clearing
And see the turquoise
plastic Port O Potty.



Le bain

(The bath)

It has been years since you drew one
And now you descend into mercury again

The warmth in the extremities
As if heat rays shoot out of you

The drip of the hot faucet
maintains a constant temperature

There are your feet and toes
Kept apart from you for so very long

Standing in a shower like a penitent
And now you are reunited

They are the hidden face of what you know
And you embrace their wrinkled selves

Hello matched team, whose
Intelligence is plodding

Do you remember to let out a squirt
It's wrong, but what is the harm

And when you lay back and immersed
Brain is haloed by rush of fish

One stream entering another
On their journey to the sea

Nature morte

(still life)

Spoiled pear on a linen napkin,
A Metro stub and twenty centimes
A sticky spoon in a jar of figs
Fruit flies hover
Like mini-cherubini



The eyed eclair

Occam's razor
is shaving us thin
deep down
below the skin.

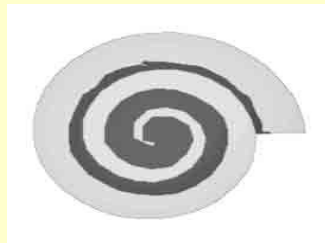
The rule is it has
To make some sense
Yet everything is gone
into bliss.

I propose logic
that leaps and bounds
considerations
taken out of account.

Because a thing is
is why it can't be.
It restores the imp
to possibility.

God and the devil
share a carpool,
Jesus and Hitler
paddle canoe.

Mirror man
is up to the task.
The eyed eclair
asks do not ask.



Old Man Climbing

The old man begged not to begin the ascent,
but we looped a rope around his head and dragged him up,
gasping.

Oh, don't be so negative we called back to him, staggering
And admit it, you need exercise, use it or lose it!

Halfway up he collapsed on the rocks, his eyes rolling
bloodshot red. Come on, old feller, we tugged at the rope,

I must admit he did his level best, on those shaky pins
wobbling
His breath wheezing out like an asthmatic accordion

And when we dropped him off at his place, heaving,
We winked to each other. He's going to have a good sleep
now!



Les oiseaux

Some songs are familiar, almost
A voice that has spoken to us on other days

Other birds sound like electrons colliding
Caroming happiness with the day

There are birds who peep in mechanical code
as if reminding themselves who they are

Some birds are like bloggers, no pattern
At all, their discourse improvisatory

Moi-je, moi-je they say
It is always all about themselves

Like a wincing motor, it turns,
It snarls, but never actually starts

mm-HMM

Somewhere on our journey I picked up the terrible habit
Of answering Rachel absently
Mm-HMM,
With a hard accent on the second syllable,
Like, Say WHAT? Or 'Scuse ME?
So that what sounds like it should be agreement,
Oh my yes indeedy!
Comes across instead as judgmental reproach,
You want it WHEN?
You really believe THAT?
Rachel looks at me like I am an Rex Harrison
Correcting her on matters of everything
From architecture to history to French vocabulary
And I evidently sound like the world's consummate ass
But I have no idea I'm doing it
until I say it and look at her, horror-stricken
And evidently, deep down,
in the pit of the soul where the dark things skitter
That ass must be the man I am
The guy who waits for other people to make mistakes
So he can shimmy down from his goalpost
And administer correction with a bonk.
Oh DEAR, pas MOI, ma CHERE.
Better to have one's tongue yanked
from its housing than to be this
kind of fruity fish
But even keeping mouth shut is no guarantee
because it is a hum, it is not even words,
you can speak evil without articulating sounds
O God I must guard against this tendency
with all that is in me, Oh NO!
There it goes again, once you start
you can't stop, I have always been
a know-it-all but until now I knew to
keep that information to myself.

They told me if went to Europe it would
change my outlook
But I look in the mirror and I see
Transylvania

La fromage lazare

(The Lazarus cheese)

“We milk the sheep
And stir the milk
And when it hardens
Place it in the cave.

“The fungi are drawn
To dark moisture, and swarm
over the great white wheels, and cover
Them with a leathery skin.

“But the cheese is so warm
It radiates its sunshine
Deep in the darkness
And the fungi seep into the light.

“Then the spiders descend
And they are hungry for the fruit.
They lay their eggs around the wheel
Like a drapery to protect it.

“After five years we remember
There is cheese down there
Deep within the cave
And we fetch it wrapped in cloth.

“It is like a monster made of monsters
And we cut it open and it breathes
From the depths it gasps
And exudes its bouquet.”

“But it is so sweet,” I say,
So delicious!”
“Yes, but for five black years
It was death!”

L'abbaye de les abeilles

(Abbey of the bees)

In Caunes-Minervois the Cathares were put to the torch,
Twelfth-century hippies whose simplicity offended
The powers that were.

This afternoon I read in the Abbey of St. Adelbert,
A hotel now, with motion sensors
For late-night stair climbing.

Between a crack in the courtyard wall
Honeybees exit to forage for flowers,
mute apart from a casual hum.

Narcissus, chrysanthemum, hydrangea and rose,
A friend to those who cannot
find the Latin words to pray.

The Albigensians have resumed their positions,
High in the ramparts they toil,
Stings sheathed.

They go about their business in the beauty
They spite both government and the church,
Their only objective is sweetness.

No earthly power can tear them from their hive
And only light substantiates
Their song.



La femme

The woman was hanged onstage
and the lifting sprained her back
and since the opera things
have been difficult.

When she is in spasm,
I knead out
The knots and tangles
from her spine.

When I massage her I work
from her neck to her soles.
She whimpers like a doe,
if does whimper, I don't know.

She is the general
directing the attack
indicating with a nod
what happens next and how.

She is the wounded lioness
clambering up a hill
And despite the pain
She will make it to the top

We have a deal
That when we say farewell
and she beams at me as now,
on the railway landing

She will be the femme
My lion-woman
And I am her man
for the duration.

Le train envers

(The wrong train)

You watch the board with the flipping
numbers
And suddenly it is your train and
you race
To the gate, dragging your suitcase
behind you
And you find the last car and you climb
up the steps
And collapse in your seat as the train
pulls out.
For an hour all is well, the countryside
Clicking by you.
Then you are in Poitiers and the train
starts to slow
And you are seized with fear because you are
on express to Paris,
There should be no stops -- the horror
hits you.
You have boarded the
wrong train.
You glance about at the other
passengers.
How lucky they seem, to be going where
they are going,
And not having to call Jean-Paul in the night
and say
Come get me, dear cousin, I'm in Brussels,
I think.



La poete du mal

Now you know my secrets
said the man in the harlequin mask
that was made that way by a magic marker.

The people pluck their fingers
from their ears and blow
their children's noses like bassoons.

Why do you continue about
your parents' parenting, they say,
and other unmouthable truths?

You are the selfishest poet
there ever was, they say,
and that is saying something.

Aubade

(on parting at morning)

The darkness parts reluctantly
A dog in the black barks once,
And bats flit silently beside the house
At a boar come by to gnaw on the apricots
or a deer dipping for the sweet chew of romaine

The crow of the coq seems premature
The church bells sound seven
But nothing happens, the village
Is fumbling for the snooze button
Then the first hint of lifting
Suffuses the horizon

The lights of cars along the Dordogne
appear and disappear as they round curves
Cats, cold and complaining from the chill
Sound sour, then the clatter of a beer truck
Rattling its bottles on a bump in the road

A church bell bangs for a whole half minute
And the fathers stumble out of bed
You can hear the ignition click and groan,
the ohs and ahs of changing gears.

And Madame Fleury walks in her night coat,
Rolling pin tucked under one arm,
and the dark holds a candle to the world

Lascaux

Down the twisty corridors
The animals dance by torchlight
The bison and the bison,
Wild bull and wild bull,
The reindeer curtsies to his partner
Which licks him on the brow
The wet muzzles of ancient cows
Exhale snow in the crowded hall.
The walls grow closer
And the calcite drips longer
And the jaws of the father
Grind down on the son.
The mountain of ice
And the museum of fire,
the colors of oxide and manganese mingle
Concavities bloom and convexities swell
And the mountain museum devours
A hillful of christs
Poking out of the ground

There is Vincent shot through the lung
And Henri drowned in the ink in his well
Verlaine shoots Rimbaud
And Rimbaud shoots Verlaine
And there is Picasso
Bowing before the rhino
And there is Duchamps
On his stuttering staircase
The knot of mares of Marc Chagall
Float upside down on the flickering wall
And ice and stalactite take their toll
of the rust and charcoal and oil
the bear and the elk and
the ox and the bull
the cave grinds against the bones of all

and sunshine collapses
to a tiny black ball



Les vacances sont finis

(Our holiday concludes)

How can one think of going home
To the gristle of living
The pummel of performance
The ordinariness that mugs you
And shakes you down
Till change fountains from pockets
Puffed out like fleurs-de-lis?

One may live like the Baron of Beynac
Resolute and armored
More trilobite than man
Brooding from his granite rampart
A danger to all who glance up
And get blinded by surmise.

Or one may return as tourist-as-clown
Patting his wallet for reassurance
The joker in the deck whose
Hat-horns dangle, unerect to the last,

Not “I know” which is a wall of stone
To crouch behind,
But “I think” or “perhaps” or
“unless I’m mistaken,” all hedged
And botanical and bearing red berries
A little translucent once held
To the light.

And one would be slow in all that one does,
Slower than a tree-sloth to minimize
All sense of ownership because who
Is an author, we are really all actors
All playing our part,
And “Introducing, as the sloth, the sloth.”

But be thorough because
Time has been set aside to do so
Not the flash of lighting that sings
Every sage eyebrow but the thick ooze
that lubricates the belly of the slug.

And one will be worshipful
For there is grandeur back there
In Minnesota, one recalls,
And as following in the footsteps
Of the painters did not make one paint,
So the guy with a guidebook
was not not a fool.





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