***\* Summer’s Leavings \****

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 ***All the Lost Things***

 ***Arthur Chapin***

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***A Nestling***

I noticed that crumple in the dust,

how the bones peeped through skin

hanging loose as a nightshirt.

Ants wept dryly

up into the clenches of the eyes

and down again.

Two thin trickles

fed blackly

in and out of the beak.

A thing whose mother let it starve

opened its mouth

and gave nurture.

I raised it against the sky

till the veins glowed like rivers

on a parchment map

to give it a moment’s

share

in the sweet blue altitudes.

***Epitaph***

I was only a child (an only child).

Soft bones were knitting in my womb.

I jumped, or fell—I’ll never tell.

My bones lie in this little tomb.

***The Carousel***

The carousel, this thing she loved,

The snow-white mane, her sheer delight,

That round-and-round-hydraulically-dancing

Proud and beautiful prancing stallion

­           —*Where is Mary?*—

That prancing stallion, proud and beautiful,

Hydraulically dancing round and round,

Her sheer delight (the snow-white mane!),

This thing she loved: the carousel.

***Pathetic Fallacy***

Weren’t they the victims of a pathetic fallacy,

thinking that they could feel, that they wanted to feel?

On the cliff above the seething sea

why did that rock rock back and forth, or try to,

as if to dash out its brains? Because when the child

plummeted into the thirsty water, it had sat there,

unmoved? Because when the snake snuck

under it, flicking his forked tongue,

it could have refused to harbor him?

And the bone-crack of that storm cloud overhead:

What on earth compelled it to pace the heavens so,

returning to the same spot with its nebulous comb

as if to card the shadows for some needle it had lost?

Why throw that fitful lightning on the matter

only to wander off again, muttering in comminuted thunder?

No wonder the rabbit screamed.

Later, the tide crept away from shore like a criminal

out after curfew, because it was a criminal out after curfew,

because nothing was supposed to stir:

This was to be another night of bereavement,

with next morning’s pall already picked out for it,

hanging in the hallway on the customary peg

And if the wind runs whining with the old complaint,

look at it through the wind’s eyes:

wouldn’t yours tear up to see that same old figure

in black, in the archetypal shadow-cloak,

thrusting a shoulder into you like a knife?

***Tomorrow, at Dawn***

***(Demain, dès l’aube)***

 ***After Victo Hugo***

*For his drowned daughter Adèle.*

Tomorrow, at dawn, at the hour when fields turn pale,

I will set out. I know you want me to.

I will climb the hill, I will walk the vale.

How could I stay here, far away from you?

I will walk quickly. I must cover ground.

I will walk blindly in the morning light.

Arms crossed, back stooped, I will not look around,

And day for me will be the dead of night.

I will not notice the sky’s golden-graying,

The white sails reaching Harfleur in the gloom.

As soon as I arrive, I will be laying

Green holly and flowering heather on your tomb.

***Triolet: That Summer’s Day***

What made you do it on that summer’s day?

It’s what I’m always coming back to, lover.

Your friends and family ask, but I can’t say

What made you do it on that summer’s day.

*No note?* No note. My hair is turning gray.

My mind keeps circling, hoping to discover

What made you do it on that summer’s day.

It’s what I’m always coming back to, lover.

***Pantoum: V-Formations***

I. *The Maple Tree, Years Later*

You had to leave me when the season changed:

The whipping wind, rain spilling from the skies…

The maple tree is shaken and estranged.

Geese on the wing: again I hear your cries.

The whipping wind, rain spilling from the skies:

Things almost spell the fragments of a creed.

Geese on the wing again: I hear your cries.

Where did it go, that dandelion seed?

Things almost spell the fragments of a creed

And I recall the turbulent litany:

*Where did it go, that dandelion seed?*

The leaves tear from the bending maple tree

And I recall the turbulent litany:

*How soon things reach the end of their brief length!*

*The leaves tear from the bending maple tree*

*When clouds of autumn spill their darkening strength.*

How soon things reach the end of their brief length

Let the birds testify: They fly away

When clouds of autumn spill their darkening strength.

The wind is flinging leaves, as if to say

*Let the birds testify!* They fly away.

The maple tree is shaken and estranged.

The wind is flinging leaves, as if to say

You had to leave me when the season changed.

II.*The Great Motion*

I always knew and I will never know

What they write wildly in a single sign,

This poem of going where you have to go.

The things I had were never really mine.

What they write wildly in a single sign,

The leaves are whispering. Nothing can stand still:

The things I had were never really mine.

The muscle of flying is an ignorant will.

The leaves are whispering, *Nothing can stand still!*

And something in me wills a repetition.

The muscle of flying is an ignorant will,

This cutting through the air is a decision

And something in me wills a repetition.

They pierce in the direction of their need:

This cutting through the air is a decision.

*V* is for Vain and Vague. (What is my creed?)

They pierce in the direction of their need.

*V* is for Visiting and Voyaging,

*V* is for Vain and Vague. What, is my creed

A twig, a promise, any broken thing?

*V* is for Visiting and Voyaging.

A peacock cries, *I was here long before!*

A twig, a promise, any broken thing:

Again they stir and settle—nothing more.

A peacock cries. I was here long before

I combed the leaves today, and left them thinned.

Again they stir and settle—nothing more,

And the wind answers only to the wind.

I combed the leaves today, and left them thinned.

Of rain, of leaves and leaving there’s no end

And the wind answers only to the wind.

The broken branch and bough: how shall they mend?

Of rain, of leaves and leaving there’s no end,

Sky-Writers. How are lives and leaves arranged?

The broken branch and bough, how shall they mend?

My hair grows thin, and all things are estranged.

Sky-Writers, how are lives and leaves arranged?

Unfold your secret Word, cry me the way

My hair grows thin, and all things are estranged,

And tell me why she followed you that day.

Unfold your secret Word, cry me the way,

Spell out the motion of that letter *V*

And tell me why she followed you that day.

Shall I read Vanish and Velocity,

Spell out the motion of that letter *V*?

Each fall you write it on a page of sky.

Shall I read Vanish and Velocity?

Perhaps the wind will pause and tell me why,

Each fall, you write it on a page of sky,

This poem of going where you have to go.

Perhaps the wind will pause and tell me why

I always knew and I will never know.

***Archaic Torso in Nevada***

The head I never heard from.

But the body sees me. Its fuzzed

contours glow. The flashlight

inside, a barium swallow,

concentrates the radiance

of such a sorry state. My life

is its loose change: around

the corners of the death

curve little glistenings

of sustenance. Their survival

corrodes into my own:

nits of light feeding and fed

look through my eyes

at everything

I am not.

***Plans***

 *For my brother.*

You were nursing a hangover when the voices

started to talk to you. You were chain-smoking cigarettes

and poring over a complicated architectural drawing.

Things were slowly creeping out toward the edges

of themselves, and you began to notice spirits talking

of past lives. There was something strange about your hand.

You had taken to reading the palm of that hand:

Solomon’s Ring promised fame and riches. The voices

confirmed commissions, vacation residences, talking

of skyscrapers, government office complexes. Cigarettes

were building their yellow residue between the edges

of your middle and index fingers. You found drawing

harder and harder. The voices threatened you, drawing

a ring of skulls around your plans. *Buzz-buzz.* Was that hand

even yours? When thoughts are shapes whose every edge is

a smudge, where is traction, what can end or begin? The voices

control the weather now. Even the palm trees are talking

about you, in whispers. Ghosts are smoking your cigarettes.

You come home pursued by an incoherent destiny. Cigarettes

choke the ashtrays. The Devil has this noose he is drawing

around your choices. Your hair is falling out. You have to hand

it to the KGB, the chummy poisoners… A chorus is talking

you into smashing your teeth. With a mouthful of jagged edges

you walk your nightmares into daylight, a snicker of voices

crosses the friendly lines of meaning, and your human voice is

cheated out of its senses. No edges, and nothing but edges.

It goes on, the automatic business of breathing, drawing

in actual atoms like the ghosts of too many cigarettes,

exhaling a smoke faint as the scrawl that records second-hand

oracles, sloughed by angels or quasars. I listen to you talking

to yourself, mumble bursts into giggle. What are you talking

*about*? The doctors don’t know. Their collegial voices

confer in the hallways.—Does some invisible hand

channel the smoke of titration, the rising price of cigarettes,

assemble them into sketches of Providence, drawing

things toward a stabilized center, though mad at the edges,

where the Spirits won’t stop talking? Daylight is drawing

near the edges of sleep. Lovers will wake up hand in hand.

Your day ends where it begins, with the voices of cigarettes.

***Our Lady***

It rained, but softly,

and the trickle of water

down my face almost

washed away the salt.

The Psalm hallowed the air,

even if the priest flubbed

a word now and then.

That night, the moon shed no tears,

but the light it sent through the windows

was of its very palest shade.

But how could I decline the invitation

of the room upstairs to sit on the bed

in the dark not listening to the murmur

of sympathies down in the living room,

the heavenly intercessions by

Our Lady of If There’s Anything I Can Do?

***The Great Galveston Storm of 1900***

It flooded the house

till it reached the attic

and the mother shouted

at the child and raised him

up to the rafters with her hands.

The dog kept swimming

into the room barking

but he could not be heard

above the roar, the water

vomited him out the door

and he would swim back in

and swim back out again and

then it carried him away.

And the mother after him.

\*

The tire hanging by a rope

from the arm of the poplar tree,

when will it remember

how to swing back and forth?

Doesn’t it still feel those

light pushes it received

from the hand of the mother,

and the strength of the limb held out

for the child to swing from

to the uncertain end of evening?

*The leaves are turning funny colors!*

It is surprising, what happens

when a lit cigarette is dropped.

One morning we found them,

black-and-white bits of flotsam

scattered across the flowerbed,

family photographs excised

from albums by the inexplicable will

of a pair of scissors.

What could you do, then, but tear

them into smaller and smaller pieces?

*The leaves are turning funny colors.*

Because you could not remember

whose faces they were

because you could not remember

what faces were

what faces

what?

\*

It was as if a great wind

swooped through the house

and snatched up your mind

and dropped it somewhere

in another state.

It was as if a great storm

sent a flood through the house

and it swept you away

and we never saw you again.

***The Waters Rose and Light Descended***

The waters rose

and light descended.

Clouds shook out

their sheets of rain.

Darkness passed over

the face of the deep

and the deep underwater

and the waters on high.

\*

The halcyon

flopped on the mudflats.

Mouths of fish

worked open and shut.

\*

To reach us it leaped

how many horizons?

Is this what the Prophets

glimpsed in its crouch,

a small thing waiting

to rear up and be real?

Small as the glint

in my father’s eyes.

\*

The scum has risen

and floats on the surface,

flaunts its shimmer

at the lowering sun.

The sky is upended: bottom feeders

have the run of Heaven.

Down from the rafters

small-mouth angels jeer.

\*

Where is my father?

How could this happen?

Where is the kindness

that shone on the waters?

Where is the likeness

that hived in the mirror?

\*

There was a flood.

Then a flood. And again a flood.

When the last one receded

how would the scattered

be bribed once more

to gather together

in twos and threes,

stick figures sighted

picking their way

through a Damage so vast?

\*

I parted my mother’s hair

like black water,

thinking to see

a weeping face, raw as a field

when the flood withdraws.

A fist unclosing.

\*

Where are you, Father?

Can you see me?

Don’t look at the black umbrellas

bobbing  on the water.

\*

I parted your hair

and thought your eyes

knew me—they fixed me

me with a glare.

When you said nothing,

Mother, you meant

*Who is he*

*Who is he*

You opened your mouth and

slapped your knees, Other.

\*

They put the ancient

 baby in its boat.

The wooden boat

floated on the waters—

on the wide waters

wandered away

between starfish

and stars.

***Autumn Noon***

The sun at the zenith is a snapshot

of itself, it is moving so slowly

toward the downward side.

Leaves in their little bonfires roughen

the air with a hickory smell. Smoke floats

in with me through the screen door.

Sometimes I can barely believe

in the swell of day—this glare that hides

the same ghosts that swirl around us

in the night, full of inaudible turbulence.

You can’t see them. But they’re there.

They push out against the bland pastels,

convex the world a little, like the moon’s pull.

I think they want to be known.

The gray of their hair remembers the glance

on vanished waters—a photographic memory

of the halides of the moon, how they coated

the waves with their thin silver—

color of the distance between them

and all they loved along the vivid shores.

They moved through their sunlit patches of life.

\*

A split-second’s exposure, camera pointed

too directly into the sun, and you are more a shadow

than a smiling man standing in the vegetable garden.

\*

Little things, a touch, a shared bowl

of blackberries: they pencil themselves

into memory’s floating calendar.

It takes the look of the light on the willow tree,

supports, like a raft, that clutch of leaves

drifting past on their vague way to the sea.

*This* moment, in this house—with just that

muffled thwack of the screen door

shutting behind me as I enter—trembles

beneath the weight of summer’s leavings.

There is a shifting scar on my retinas

from the brightness outside.

The light is turned inside-out,

sinking into its negatives.

Your smile, in the photograph, is a crease.

Shadows are streaming in through the windows.

*Hold this up to the darkness like a prism.*

I, too, am fading, father,

into the glare that hides you.

I bring what I leave behind, like a wake.

***The Oak Tree on Fire***

Home from the service, I’m reminded

of something. Does the smoky smell

in the house bring it back? The air outside,

crisp as the leaves that stray from fall to fall?

We’re in the living room, rubbing our hands

before the hearth. The only other sound

is a crackle of kindling, sometimes a log

whistling out its last drop of moisture.

It is the time of day when a window,

tired of transparency, hesitates, begins

to reflect. I glimpse a redness

in the center of the pane:

For the thinnest moment

the oak tree in the garden is on fire

and you are out there, Father,

looking at me from among the branches.

***Cemetery in the Blue Ridge***

                                                                                *For my mother.*

For two-hundred-fifty years

this image of a child and the Lamb of God

on the grave marker next to yours

has been dissolving like a stone cloud.

There is a lightness

hidden in the density of grief,

a clearing.

I think of birds alive in their bones

and the air alive with their cries,

hawk and eagle, vulture and hawk

dipping and wheeling over

stillness.

***When January Comes Around***

Each year, when January comes around,

I crouch before a little slab of marble.

I touch your name as if you lived inside it,

in narrow channels, cuts that are the words.

The tracks my feet have printed in the snow

are hollow signs that somebody was here.

The spring, when it restores the warmth of things,

is an erasure and a green forgetting.

Your eyes are dreams as green as I remember.

Your bones are facts as naked as the trees.

***Haunting***

You death was such a shock

to me that ever since then

I’ve been haunting your ghost.

Once you saw something moving

at the top of the stairs. Sorry.

I didn’t mean to scare you.

***Kintsugi***

 My broken tea bowl

Has healed. Still, the golden seams

    remind me of you.

***Lullaby***

Walk with me, love,

in the shadow orchard.

Look:

The leaves grieve. Tears

fatten on branches like pears.

Here are the beasts of sorrow

rocking on their haunches.

Here are the feasts of darkness

gathered up in sheaves.

*Sshh. She is sleeping.*

*\**

The blind mole burrows

into a hole,

digs up a dirt of words.

How could they pierce

The beekeeper’s veil?

He walks in a smoke of bees

and feels no sting.

*He walks in his sleep.*

*\**

Midsummer crickets

leaped in the meadow grass.

They scraped the tinder

of their legs

and ignited the air

with a dry singing.

With that scorch in the ear

how could we sleep?

*\**

The death of a rose

is the death of a thousand roses.

But of all the leaves that fall

or have fallen

who mourns the single leaf?

The leaf that has fallen

*has fallen asleep.*

*\**

The beekeeper stands

still, lets fall his hands.

The willow tree

in its fatherbeard

motionlessly weeps.

*How long has it wept?*

The wind not sweeping

and the leaves unswept.

*How long has she slept?*

*\**

A brightness of leaves

mottles the grass.

Silence perches

on a branch.

The swallows are gone.

The sky, a sheet of glass—

a sheer, steep pane.

The swallows are gone.

*Let her sleep.*

*\**

Precocious frost gifts

the nipped

bud with a cloak of crystal,

fragile and stiff.

Harvest of the lost things:

how are you counted?

*He counted, and wept.*

The world is the rose

and the things beneath it.

The dandelion sows

the air with its teeth.

*How long will she sleep?*

*\**

Lie warm

in your bed,

Love. Be calm

if you can.

Think of the lake,

how the maple leaves drifted.

She moves and is out of you

substantial and small.

She came to be with you.

She went back.

We mustn’t wake her,

mustn’t ask her why

*she sleeps.*

*\**

We clasp our hands

around your absence.

Look! Our hands are full.

Hold us tight,

Dear, in the loss

of your gift.

Hold us near

in the keep

of your loss*.*

*Sleep.*

*Sleep.*

***Tell Me Again***

Tell me again about the Holy Fool.

*The world fits easily inside his heart*.

Isn’t that what you said? *And there’s room*

*left over for an extra playground swing,*

*a picnic table, and exactly one gaggle*

*of giggling girls.*

*Everything’s so miraculously*

*silly there*—isn’t that how

the story went? *You stuff basketfuls*

*of golden apples in your mouth*

*and the juice running down your chin*

*is a river on a treasure map*

*and the sun’s a Catherine Wheel*

*nailed to the tree of the sky.*

That fairy tale, repeat it, please,

word for word, as mothers tell it

in the memory of the Sacred Simpleton:

*Once upon a time they lived happily ever after.*

Tell me a worn-out legend,

won’t you, Dear? I want to hear it

because it is a legend,

because it is worn out,

like an old child’s blanket,

full of a sleepiness

that still comes over me

when I run my fingers over the wool.

Tell me again the outlandish tales

the villagers still tell

in the soul of the Village Idiot,

where Heaven is bluer

than any possible Heaven

and nothing is waiting for us there

but happiness, no, never

anything but happiness.

***Magic Lantern***

The light whose jail is a magic lantern

signals its distress by casting a spray

of photon pebbles at the wall a child

pieces into the colors of amazement.

Logic, ideas, these can never live up

to our illusions, expectancies that glow

like anti-shadows on a dreaming wall.

When was I ever more than what the limelight

made me, prompting, from behind, my entrance

as painted paladin on painted steed?

At the far end of hallways past, one room

projects me on that ghostly gauze, the future.

My magic jail is made of childlight failing,

shows that are over, quicklime growing cold***.***

***Harvest***

Late October, we were raking leaves—

vivid oak and maple slough—

when suddenly I lay on the grass

and heaped a pile around me.

Soon I was up to my face

in brittle death-confetti.

I asked you to take my photograph.

I assumed the fixed stare of a dead man.

My eyes were filled with cold, clear sky.

\*

Is it the fate of a middle-aged man to sit alone

in a room studying pictures of his youth, trying

to account for the whims that brought him there?

He sees himself settling into a bed of organic matter

facing a sky that withdraws into its distance

like the one a sinking man sees as he looks up

at the surface of the water. Almost transfixing,

the stillness of the gaze, how all that drifting-apart

seems gathered there for a moment, like a harvest.

***Look into the Air***

His dreams were made of nothing and led nowhere.

It seemed the same thing, to succeed or fail.

He’s gone now. There is nothing left to find.

Not in the city, not at the end of the trail

Of burning bridges that he left behind.

The ashes are scattered. Look into the air.

***The Praise Singer***

When God gave food to the hungry

they returned the gift as praise.

Let me praise the hunger

and the gift of praise.

For everything.

For nothing.