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SMOKE, HATS

My father wore a hat and smoked if he was awake.
He wore a hat mowing the lawn in his undershirt
and smoked lying down and standing up. He smoked

at the table. He smoked like he meant it. He did
mean it. Smoking didn't kill him any more than
wearing a hat killed him. Something else killed him.

Something else. I don't know what killed him.
Do you remember what killed him? Something else.
I won't wear a hat outside. I don't wear a hat unless

my ears are falling off in the cold and my breath is
like smoke. Just like smoke. I don't wear a yarmulke
in temple because I want God to see me, the one

who's not wearing a yarmulke, if God should need
to see me. But I don't go to temple often. I hardly ever
go to temple. If God wants to find me he could look

for my breath like white smoke in the cold. Or he
could look for the one whose ears are about to fall off,
the one walking fast, wishing he had remembered his hat.

ERASURE

The branch, when I
 pry it up out of the ice

on the patio because
 I mean to let it dry and

set it on fire for its
 negligible quantum of heat,

leaves a foliate negative
 that melts and fades,

the only image of itself
 it will have ever surrendered,

like leaf prints
 on a sidewalk or

indecipherable graffiti on
 the previously never-noticed walls.

Absence, being infinite, is
 what sticks, what enthralls.

The sun itself
 will have to count on

the memory of
 surviving stars when

approximately eight billion years
 from approximately now

it has its last day
 and falls into the always

night, those sister stars
 who knew their little brother

when he was obnoxiously
 hot, unmercifully bright.

Memory is what we have
 until memory fades away.

POET DESCENDING A STAIRCASE

The logical thing would be couplets, one
line for each foot and so on until you get to

the landing where your love is waiting,
naked as you are, except it turns out
there are an odd number of steps so you

climb back to the top, so sorry, and try to
figure out whether tercets will get you
where you need to go or some odd
combination of couplets, tercets, quatrains,

anything that gives the appearance of
intentional art, but not having counted
stairs on the way back up you have no
freaking idea how to get to the bottom
of things without falling insouciantly down

the entire flight, your head clipping the
banister balusters like a xylophone and your
arms and legs changing places continuously
as if in a cubist cartoon which they in fact
are in while you try to keep smiling that same
smile which your love once said in different

circumstances, never to be repeated after
tonight, she found impossible to resist.

THE PAINTING OF THE BARN WITHOUT THE BARN

for Joan Snyder

In order to paint the painting of the barn
without the barn you must first give up

the rectangle, which would have been
useful as a tool for scale, proportion,

position on the canvas, general uprightness,
flatness, thingness, off which the light

of a normal day might be reflected. You must
also bid regretful farewell to the bean fields

surrounding the barn. Even the rolling hills
of your neighbor's property in the far

northeast corner of your frame and their
possible contribution to perspective must be

gainsaid in favor of the idea of the barn,
the idea of the color of the barn and what

shape that idea takes if it is meant to contain
the idea of small, useful animals, the idea of hay.

Eventually you begin to paint. Eventually
the ideas find their favorite colors and arrange

themselves the way notes arrange themselves
on the page for someone who has never read music.

THE POET DECIDES TO STOP WRITING

for Mark Strand

We could have guessed where you were headed,
I suppose, even from your early work, with its

Focus on the edge of the page, the comforting
Distance between people and other people, things

And other things. But even liminality, an entire
Lifetime of it, has limits. It would take someone

As determined and crafty as you to figure out
How to start unsaying, in that consistent, understated

Style, what you've already said. Perhaps you
Started not writing too late to undo what you wanted

Undone. Or was it mainly your intention to
Slowly start the planet rotating in the opposite direction

On its same and only axis? We are taught early on,
If we happened to have been paying attention,

That in the world of real numbers, every integer
Has its real and necessary negative. There are

Alternative universes, populated only by
Mathematical necessity, made plausible by what

We have discovered we may not know. This is
Where all the unwritten poems go, traveling out

From here, one by one, converging with what you
Always suspected, although unseen, we just might need.

THE ANNUAL WORKMEN'S CIRCLE PICNIC, SUMMER, 1955,
IN A FIELD OUTSIDE NASHVILLE

Exactly how they picked the field I'll never know,

far enough away from anything
you could call a road so that several

minutes of involuntary bouncing

were required, nearly my favorite part
of the whole day, next to the hot dogs,

which had more bite in them the way Yiddish

contains more vowels and consonants, and my first
taste of beer, which, although Schlitz and foul,

was undeniably cold and important.

How my sister made it through the day
I'll never know, what with no friends and nothing

to do but pitch horseshoes and play poker

and throw a ball at wooden bottles
for a kewpie doll or a stuffed panda,

both of which she was far too old for,

and try to stay out of the sun and put off going
to the portable to pee, which would be

impossible since everyone was looking.

Everyone looked old to me and used up
in this field out in the country, but happy,

just how happy I'll never know, happy

not to be dead in Poland or Ukraine, happy
to have found a place to have children in,

strange and plausible,

a place to pitch a tent at the end of summer.
This is how I came to be here

or anywhere, a group of men deciding
that Nashville needed one more Jewish tailor
to come stand in this field with his family,
to drink his beer, to be nothing exceptional.

SEASONAL, AN ODE

Deadheading the geraniums,
what am I prepared to miss most?
That scent of green on my fingers
and, now the summer is done for,
their perfervid insistence on red,
red, yet more red before
I decide to stop watering them.

I am not in love with the natural world.
It's the unnatural world I worry about,
the late bloomers, the unnaturally early
risers, all the instances of life imitating art
imitating life. I love what lingers
unreasonably long past its season.

Who among us is not cultivar?
And what was the purpose, exactly,
of the hyper-extended tailfins
on the '57 Impala, other than to
fill me with disappointment and desire?

So what if we end up unlovely embers
in a fire we didn't set? It's time
to stop whining and prepare
for the worst, to turn on the lights
the way we always turn on the lights
to welcome the unreluctant approach
of nightfall.

 If you listen hard,
no matter how bad your ears are,
you can hear the sky and all its air
turn cold and occasionally concussive.
Are you ready for some football?

THE OLD POETS IN LINE AT THE URINALS
AT THE WRITERS' CONFERENCE

Since there are only fifteen minutes between
the end of one panel and the beginning
of the next, they come running, although truth

to tell, few can actually still run,
to get their chance to stand before the bright
white porcelain concavities we seem

to be so much the better at producing
than the French have ever been. We are not
thinking of Marcel Duchamp as we stand there,

dangling our penises absent-mindedly,
like scarred old tools that, once we have them in
our hands again, we half-expect to know

the secrets of life. We are also not thinking
about the young poets in line behind us
trying not to look impatient or annoyed.

Their time is coming, although not before
we shake off the last drop, zip up and flush,
assuming we remember to do all three,

assuming we can finish what we started
so long ago with such imperfect knowledge
and animal enthusiasm. For now,

however, we stand as one, an ancient navy
at the bright tile wall, trying to visualize
the ocean, trying to call forth the tide.

CATERPILLAR

I send you this photograph of a caterpillar
from Virginia. He, or she – how would I ever know? –

is impossibly fuzzy, perhaps a sign of harsher
than normal winter lurking in the hills
where they ride horses and hunt deer.

The caterpillar has not yet found out that they
are shooting Jews in Pittsburgh, right in the middle

of Saturday morning services. They will not
have had the chance to put the Torah away
yet, to wrap it up like a perpetually well-behaved

baby and sing it back to sleep in its velvet-lined ark,
or to hear a sermon on how to heal the world,

much less to say a prayer for the anniversaries
of the deaths of all their dead relatives. They
won't be getting around to that this morning

in the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh,
where Jews go to remind themselves that whatever

happened once can and will happen again
and where, if it were an actual tree, caterpillars
will emerge in the spring, dangling from newly

green leaves, preparing themselves as best
they can remember how to become something
that sheds history like a sad old coat and takes flight.