

## A Thousand Years or So

1

A thousand years or so ago  
when love was still a game of bait  
and switch and ring around the posey

played within measured lines laid down  
a thousand years or so before that  
by a Roman-nosed elegist

who said in nameless books and letters  
preserved by nameless Irish monks  
that love is a scheme of nouns and verbs

put together like any fiction  
with all-too-familiar situations  
personal arguments pro and con

lessons on how and how not to  
and how to get cured if you do  
(*Do we always have to argue?*)

replete with obscure references  
to versifiers said to have lived  
a thousand years earlier yet

a tongue-in-cheek of ardent convention  
for practical lovers who want to get laid  
just for the fun of it not service

to Dame Nature's natural means  
Dame Reason's most reasonable ends  
or Rome's imperial *obiter dicta*

who in his final years exiled  
so far from the center of the world no one  
there spoke Latin advised his daughter

to take care in preserving for the ages  
his verses that in her own writing  
no man or woman learn to love

2

a thousand years or so ago  
when as we were saying love  
was still a game of catch me if you can

the courteous French and curious Cathars  
decided to complicate the matter  
by crossing Fair Lady with Virgin Mother

putting the lover's simple complaint  
through labyrinths of narrative  
analysis and elastic debate

exquisite tortures of harem virtue  
arabesques of purity  
drawn and quartered by holy orders

of men given to ascetic extensions  
of lyric moments on the rack of romance  
to dance and smile act after act

in concordance with script and scripture  
transforming the reader through strange device  
of lips tongues ears and eyes

having little to do with knowing  
in the biblical sense or turning stones  
into gold, death into transmigration

or figuring out the West's obsession  
with Freedom and Necessity  
the Orient's puzzle of One and Many

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until an avant garde Parisian  
grown very tired of virtue cloaked  
in monkish habit and courtly manner

the Saracen tunes of the troubadours  
spiritualized into plainsong  
by Roman teachings of cross and stake,

adolescent hopes for salvation  
reduced to delusions of self-transformation

of hypocrite lovers in love with themselves,

silent lovers one never can have;  
reverting (despite all those years of platonic  
ideals from Augustus to Bonaventura)

in rhymed octosyllabic couplets  
to pagan carnality (*Can we  
never have what we most want?*)

armed his knight-errant with all he knew  
of nature, genius, language and love  
to breach the rose-garden wall, cut through

the maze surrounding his heart's desire,  
kneel to kiss the relics at its root  
then, gently, mindful of thorns

(which though allegorical  
might yet for all his mail prove fatal,  
leave his tale hanging in the air

impaled as a predatory bug  
might be by a shrike keeping watch  
from a branch high overhead),

push aside the slender limbs,  
tenderly cup in his hands the bud  
he had longed so long and hard to embrace,

urge apart the blushing petals  
each revealing its own perfume  
each anxious to know the sun

until the bloom comes entirely open  
bidding him enter the hidden passage  
where no other had ever been,

disappear into her *jouissance*  
leaving the merest trace of himself  
a mustard seed in the name of love

an Irish antiquarian dandy  
only recently emerged

from the host of fairies and banshees  
cavorting in the Celtic twilight  
transposed to his London drawing rooms

still harping on the antic theme,  
painting masks for the play of desire,  
protesting with ascendant swans

the immanent spell of beastly weather  
but cursed by the prior century  
of sentimental poetasters

who confused art with life —  
finding himself in self-imposed exile  
no matter where he found himself

rejected by the battle-axe beauty  
his shadow most amused itself with  
through page and stage and senate bill —

paid to have goat and monkey balls  
stitched into his own sagging scrotum  
while working out a Byzantine vision

of lords and ladies dancing for all  
eternity with noble grace  
to melodies sung by a gold-leaf bird,

art transcending soul and self  
because of the love put into it  
by craftsmen wordsmiths players and singers

those most to his mind like goddess and god  
here *in the place of excrement*  
this *foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart*

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And after that and all the pounding  
through wars and bouts of depression,  
the boom and bust and mizzenmast

learning to swim in a sea of blood,  
half a century or so  
of educated men and women

able by turn of phrase or calf  
to imitate the best of them  
with a twist of lime all their own

a learned dagger in the gut  
a verbal *anschluss* of allusion  
over the heads of *hoi polloi*

in a rising tide of market values  
a greater volume of white noise  
played back in high fidelity

from waxy surfaces as they turned  
to something highly technical  
and thoroughly ironical

*(How not to come off as either  
a dumb or an intellectual fuck?)*  
first to vinyl then to mylar

then to examples of themselves  
before the members of their class  
regretting, O so regretting

the play of words become a dirge  
intoned in institutional settings  
the play of intelligence on the page

excited by several degrees  
applied to swelling organ music  
by men in gowns with flat heads

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In this day and age when we know all about  
seductive fathers and amorous mothers  
uncles and aunts who can't keep hands off

(as bad as the priests when it comes to that),

when mutilation of body parts  
passes for ornament and watching

some jerk nail his dick to a board  
or woman piss in some loser's mouth  
counts as adult entertainment

when what's most important to most people  
in middle earth America  
is their personal appearance

when most of what gets called art  
is about getting in someone's genes  
and most of the rest about murder and theft

when medieval stereotypes  
like German nun and British princess  
still saddle the public's conception of women

when we think we know as we think  
we never thought we knew before  
that fundamental reality

is riddled with rhetoric and chatter  
as any corpse in the heat with maggots,  
peace harder to come by than ever,

when moral ambiguities  
gender diversity and credit  
plans are classical responses

to global control by money and power  
(the very food we eat denatured  
by corporate ghosts into tempting forms

of intellectual property,  
the very truths we have always lived by  
prepackaged and predigested

into tasteless clichés shoved down our throats)  
all the world but a small percent  
of a small percent serfs and vassals

to transnational hedgefund moguls,  
when justice is sold, freedom hogtied

and hope a symptom of brain damage —

children of the lonely crowd, Romans  
ourselves at this stage of empire,  
we wonder too how a simple letter

might engage the world that matters,  
turn stories on the page into something  
more touching than teaching more oral than verbal

bring all lovers *sister brother*  
*parent child significant others*  
face to face in a two-way mirror

that never lies, where one finds oneself  
perfectly expressed, knows oneself  
complete only in multitude

physical world material word  
dreams desires ideas feelings  
this finely textured medium

to quicken once more the ovoid bodies  
give opinion a point of view  
bring the dead to life again.