

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

3

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*

5

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

6

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.