Robert Duncan (January 7, 1919 – February 3, 1988)
A Little Language

I know a little language of my cat, though Dante says that animals have no need of speech and Nature abhors the superfluous. My cat is fluent. He converses when he wants with me. To speak is natural. And whales and wolves I’ve heard in choral soundings of the sea and air know harmony and have an eloquence that stirs my mind and heart—they touch the soul. Here

Dante’s religion that would set Man apart damns the effluence of our life from us to build therein its powerhouse.

It’s in his animal communication Man is true, immediate, and in immediacy, Man is all animal.

His senses quicken in the thick of the symphony, old circuits of animal rapture and alarm, attentions and arousals in which an identity rearrives. He hears particular voices among the concert, the slightest rustle in the undertones, rehearsing a nervous aptitude yet to prove his. He sees the flick of significant red within the rushing mass of ruddy wilderness and catches the glow of a green shirt to delite him in a glowing field of green—it speaks to him—and in the arc of the spectrum color speaks to color. The rainbow articulates a promise he remembers he but imitates in noises that he makes, this speech in every sense
the world surrounding him.
He picks up on the fugitive tang of mace
amidst the savory mass,
and taste in evolution is an everlasting key.
There is a pun of scents in what makes sense.

Myrrh it may have been,
the odor of the announcement that filld the house.

He wakes from deepest sleep
upon a distant signal and waits
as if crouching, springs to life.

Robert Duncan
A Poem Beginning With A Line From Pindar

I

The light foot hears you and the brightness begins
god-step at the margins of thought,
quick adulterous tread at the heart.
Who is it that goes there?
Where I see your quick face
notes of an old music pace the air,
torso-reverberations of a Grecian lyre.

In Goya’s canvas Cupid and Psyche
have a hurt voluptuous grace
bruised by redemption. The copper light
falling upon the brown boy’s slight body
is carnal fate that sends the soul wailing
up from blind innocence, ensnared
by dimness
into the deprivations of desiring sight.

But the eyes in Goya’s painting are soft,
diffuse with rapture absorb the flame.
Their bodies yield out of strength.
Waves of visual pleasure
wrap them in a sorrow previous to their impatience.

A bronze of yearning, a rose that burns
the tips of their bodies, lips,
ends of fingers, nipples. He is not wingd.
His thighs are flesh, are clouds
lit by the sun in its going down,
hot luminescence at the loins of the visible.

But they are not in a landscape.
They exist in an obscurity.

The wind spreading the sail serves them.
The two jealous sisters eager for her ruin
serve them.
That she is ignorant, ignorant of what Love will be,
serves them.
The dark serves them.
The oil scalding his shoulder serves them,
serves their story. Fate, spinning,
knots the threads for Love.

Jealousy, ignorance, the hurt . . . serve them.

II

This is magic. It is passionate dispersion.
What if they grow old? The gods
would not allow it.
Psyche is preserved.

In time we see a tragedy, a loss of beauty
the glittering youth
of the god retains—but from this threshold
it is age
that is beautiful. It is toward the old poets
we go, to their faltering,
their unaltering wrongness that has style,
their variable truth,
the old faces,
words shed like tears from
a plenitude of powers time stores.

A stroke. These little strokes. A chill.
The old man, feeble, does not recoil.
Recall. A phase so minute,
only a part of the word in- jerrd.

The Thundermakers descend,

damerging a nuv. A nerb.
The present dented of the U
nighted stayd. States. The heavy clod?
Cloud. Invades the brain. What
if lilacs last in this dooryard bloomd?
Hoover, Roosevelt, Truman, Eisenhower—
where among these did the power reside
that moves the heart? What flower of the nation
bride-sweet broke to the whole rapture?
Hoover, Coolidge, Harding, Wilson
hear the factories of human misery turning out commodities.
For whom are the holy matins of the heart ringing?
Noble men in the quiet of morning hear
Indians singing the continent’s violent requiem.
Harding, Wilson, Taft, Roosevelt,
idiots fumbling at the bride’s door,
hear the cries of men in meaningless debt and war.
Where among these did the spirit reside
that restores the land to productive order?
McKinley, Cleveland, Harrison, Arthur,
Garfield, Hayes, Grant, Johnson,
dwell in the roots of the heart’s rancor.
How sad “amid lanes and through old woods”
echoes Whitman’s love for Lincoln!

There is no continuity then. Only a few
posts of the good remain. I too
that am a nation sustain the damage
where smokes of continual ravage
obscure the flame.
It is across great scars of wrong
I reach toward the song of kindred men
and strike again the naked string
old Whitman sang from. Glorious mistake!
that cried:

“The theme is creative and has vista.”
“He is the president of regulation.”

I see always the under side turning,
fumes that injure the tender landscape.
From which up break
lilac blossoms of courage in daily act
striving to meet a natural measure.

III (for Charles Olson)
Psyche’s tasks—the sorting of seeds
wheat barley oats poppy coriander
anise beans lentils peas —every grain
in its right place
before nightfall;

gathering the gold wool from the cannibal sheep
(for the soul must weep
and come near upon death);

harrowing Hell for a casket Proserpina keeps
that must not
be opend . . . containing beauty?
no! Melancholy coild like a serpent
that is deadly sleep
we are not permitted
to succumb to.

These are the old tasks.
You’ve heard them before.

They must be impossible. Psyche
must despair, be brought to her
insect instructor;
must obey the counsels of the green reed;
saved from suicide by a tower speaking,
must follow to the letter
freakish instructions.

In the story the ants help. The old man at Pisa
mixd in whose mind
(to draw the sorts) are all seeds
as a lone ant from a broken ant-hill
had part restored by an insect, was
upheld by a lizard

(to draw the sorts)
the wind is part of the process
defines a nation of the wind—

father of many notions,
Who?  
let the light into the dark? began  
the many movements of the passion?  

West  
from east men push.  
The islands are blessd  
(cursed) that swim below the sun,  

man upon whom the sun has gone down!  

There is the hero who struggles east  
widdershins to free the dawn and must  
woo Night’s daughter,  
sorcery, black passionate rage, covetous queens,  
so that the fleecy sun go back from Troy,  
Colchis, India . . . all the blazing armies  
spent, he must struggle alone toward the pyres of Day.  

The light that is Love  
rushes on toward passion. It verges upon dark.  
Roses and blood flood the clouds.  
Solitary first riders advance into legend.  

This land, where I stand, was all legend  
in my grandfathers’ time: cattle raiders,  
animal tribes, priests, gold.  
It was the West. Its vistas painters saw  
in diffuse light, in melancholy,  
in abysses left by glaciers as if they had been the sun  
primordial carving empty enormities  
out of the rock.  

Snakes lurkd  
guarding secrets. Those first ones  
survived solitude.  

Scientia  
holding the lamp, driven by doubt;  
Eros naked in foreknowledge  
smiling in his sleep; and the light  
spilld, burning his shoulder—the outrage
that conquers legend—
passion, dismay, longing, search
flooding up where
the Beloved is lost. Psyche travels
life after life, my life, station
after station,
to be tried

without break, without
news, knowing only—but what did she know?
The oracle at Miletus had spoken
truth surely: that he was Serpent-Desire
that flies thru the air,
a monster-husband. But she saw him fair

whom Apollo’s mouthpiece said spread
pain
beyond cure to those
wounded by his arrows.

Rilke torn by a rose thorn
blackend toward Eros. Cupidinous Death!
that will not take no for an answer.

IV

Oh yes! Bless the footfall where
step by step the boundary walker
(in Maverick Road the snow
thud by thud from the roof
circling the house—another tread)

that foot informed
by the weight of all things
that can be elusive
no more than a nearness to the mind
of a single image

Oh yes! this
most dear
the catalyst force that renders clear
the days of a life from the surrounding medium!

Yes, beautiful rare wilderness!
wildness that verifies strength of my tame mind,
clearing held against indians,
health that prepared to meet death,
the stubborn hymns going up
into the ramifications of the hostile air

that, de captive, gives way.
Who is there? O, light the light!
The Indians give way, the clearing falls.
Great Death gives way and unprepares us.
Lust gives way. The Moon gives way.
Night gives way. Minutely, the Day gains.

She saw the body of her beloved
dismemberd in waking . . . or was it
in sight? Finders Keepers we sang
when we were children or were taught to sing
before our histories began and we began
who were beloved our animal life
toward the Beloved, sworn to be Keepers.

On the hill before the wind came
the grass moved toward the one sea,
blade after blade dancing in waves.

There the children turn the ring to the left.
There the children turn the ring to the right.
Dancing . . . Dancing . . .

And the lonely psyche goes up thru the boy to the king
that in the caves of history dreams.
Round and round the children turn.
London Bridge that is a kingdom falls.

We have come so far that all the old stories
whisper once more.
Mount Segur, Mount Victoire, Mount Tamalpais . . .
rise to adore the mystery of Love!
(An ode? Pindar’s art, the editors tell us, was not a statue but a mosaic, an accumulation of metaphor. But if he was archaic, not classic, a survival of obsolete mode, there may have been old voices in the survival that directed the heart. So, a line from a hymn came in a novel I was reading to help me. Psyche, poised to leap—and Pindar too, the editors write, goes too far, topples over—listend to a tower that said, Listen to Me! The oracle had said, Despair! The Gods themselves abhor his power. And then the virgin flower of the dark falls back flesh of our flesh from which everywhere . . .

the information flows
that is yearning. A line of Pindar moves from the area of my lamp toward morning.

In the dawn that is nowhere
I have seen the willful children

clockwise and counter-clockwise turning.

Robert Duncan
An African Elegy

In the groves of Africa from their natural wonder
the wildebeest, zebra, the okapi, the elephant,
have entered the marvelous. No greater marvelous
know I than the mind’s
natural jungle. The wives of the Congo
distil there their red and the husbands
hunt lion with spear and paint Death-spore
on their shields, wear his teeth, claws and hair
on ordinary occasions. There the Swahili
open his doors, let loose thru the trees
the tides of Death’s sound and distil
from their leaves the terrible red. He
is the consort of dreams I have seen, heard
in the orchestral dark
like the barking of dogs.

Death is the dog-headed man zebra striped
and surrounded by silence who walks like a lion,
who is black. It was his voice crying come back,
that Virginia Woolf heard, turnd
her fine skull, hounded and haunted, stopt,
pointed into the scent where
I see her in willows, in fog, at the river of sound
in the trees. I see her prepare there
to enter Death’s mountains
like a white Afghan hound pass into the forest,
closed after, let loose in the leaves
with more grace than a hound and more wonder there
even with flowers wound in her hair, allowing herself
like Ophelia a last
pastoral gesture of love toward the world.
And I see
all our tortures absolved in the fog,
dispersed in Death’s forests, forgotten. I see
all this gentleness like a hound in the water
float upward and outward beyond my dark hand.
I am waiting this winter for the more complete black-out, for the negro armies in the eucalyptus, for the cities laid open and the cold in the love-light, for hounds women and birds to go back to their forests and leave us our solitude.

...  

Negroes, negroes, all those princes, holding cups of rhinoceros bone, make magic with my blood. Where beautiful Marijuana towers taller than the eucalyptus, turns within the lips of night and falls, falls downward, where as giant Kings we gathered and devour her burning hands and feet, O Moonbar thee and Clarinet! those talismans that quickened in their sheltering leaves like thieves, those Negroes, all those princes holding to their mouths like Death the cups of rhino bone, were there to burn my hands and feet, divine the limit of the bone and with their magic tie and twist me like a rope. I know no other continent of Africa more dark than this dark continent of my breast.

And when we are deserted there, when the rustling electric has past thru the air, once more we begin in the blind and blood throat the African catches; and Desdemona, Desdemona like a demon wails within our bodies, warns against this towering Moor of self and then laments her passing from him.

And I cry, Hear!  
Hear in the cold and secretive ear the drums that I hear beat. The Negroes, all those princes holding cups of bone and horn, are there in halls of blood that I call forests, in the dark and shining caverns where
beats heart and pulses brain, in
jungles of my body, there
Othello moves, striped black and white,
the dog-faced fear. Moves I, I, I,
whom I have seen as black as Orpheus,
pursued deliriously his sound and drownd
in hunger's tone, the deepest wilderness.

Then it was I, Death singing,
who bewildered the forest. I thot him
my lover like a hound of great purity
disturbing the shadow and flesh of the jungle.
This was the beginning of the ending year.
From all of the empty the tortured appear,
and the bird-faced children crawl out of their fathers
and into that never filled pocket,
the no longer asking but silent, seeing nowhere
the final sleep.

The halls of Africa we seek in dreams
as barriers of dream against the deep, and seas
disturbed turn back upon their tides
into the rooms deserted at the roots of love.
There is no end. And how sad then
is even the Congo. How the tired sirens
come up from the water, not to be toucht
but to lie on the rocks of the thunder.
How sad then is even the marvelous!

Robert Duncan
We've our business to attend Day's duties, 
bend back the bow in dreams as we may 
til the end rimes in the taut string 
with the sending. Reveries are rivers and flow 
where the cold light gleams reflecting the window upon the 
surface of the table, 
the presst-glass creamer, the pewter sugar bowl, the litter 
of coffee cups and saucers, 
carnations painted growing upon whose surfaces. The whole 
composition of surfaces leads into the other 
current disturbing 
what I would take hold of. I'd been 
in the course of a letter – I am still 
in the course of a letter – to a friend, 
who comes close in to my thought so that 
the day is hers. My hand writing here 
there shakes in the currents of... of air? 
of an inner anticipation of...? reaching to touch 
ghostly exhilarations in the thought of her. 

At the extremity of this 
design
'there is a connexion working in both directions, as in 
the bow and the lyre'– 
only in that swift fulfillment of the wish 
that sleep 
can illustrate my hand 
sweeps the string.

You stand behind the where-I-am. 
The deep tones and shadows I will call a woman. 
The quick high notes... You are a girl there too, 
having something of sister and of wife, 
inconsolate, 
and I would play Orpheus for you again, 

recall the arrow or song 
to the trembling daylight
from which it sprang.

Robert Duncan
Childhood’s Retreat

It’s in the perilous boughs of the tree
out of blue sky the wind
sings loudest surrounding me.

And solitude, a wild solitude
’s revealed, fearfully, high I’d climb
into the shaking uncertainties,

part out of longing, part daring myself,
part to see that
widening of the world, part

to find my own, my secret
hiding sense and place, where from afar
all voices and scenes come back

—the barking of a dog, autumnal burnings,
far calls, close calls— the boy I was
calls out to me
here the man where I am “Look!

I’ve been where you
most fear to be.”

Robert Duncan
My Mother Would Be A Falconress

My mother would be a falconress,
And I, her gay falcon treading her wrist,
would fly to bring back
from the blue of the sky to her, bleeding, a prize,
where I dream in my little hood with many bells
jangling when I'd turn my head.

My mother would be a falconress,
and she sends me as far as her will goes.
She lets me ride to the end of her curb
where I fall back in anguish.
I dread that she will cast me away,
for I fall, I mis-take, I fail in her mission.

She would bring down the little birds.
And I would bring down the little birds.
When will she let me bring down the little birds,
pierced from their flight with their necks broken,
their heads like flowers limp from the stem?

I tread my mother's wrist and would draw blood.
Behind the little hood my eyes are hooded.
I have gone back into my hooded silence,
talking to myself and dropping off to sleep.

For she has muffled my dreams in the hood she has made me,
sewn round with bells, jangling when I move.
She rides with her little falcon upon her wrist.
She uses a barb that brings me to cower.
She sends me abroad to try my wings
and I come back to her. I would bring down
the little birds to her
I may not tear into, I must bring back perfectly.

I tear at her wrist with my beak to draw blood,
and her eye holds me, anguisht, terrifying.
She draws a limit to my flight.
Never beyond my sight, she says.
She trains me to fetch and to limit myself in fetching.
She rewards me with meat for my dinner.
But I must never eat what she sends me to bring her.

Yet it would have been beautiful, if she would have carried me,
always, in a little hood with the bells ringing,
at her wrist, and her riding
to the great falcon hunt, and me
flying up to the curb of my heart from her heart
to bring down the skylark from the blue to her feet,
straining, and then released for the flight.

My mother would be a falconress,
and I her gerfalcon raised at her will,
from her wrist sent flying, as if I were her own pride, as if her pride
knew no limits, as if her mind
sought in me flight beyond the horizon.

Ah, but high, high in the air I flew.
And far, far beyond the curb of her will,
were the blue hills where the falcons nest.
And then I saw west to the dying sun-it seemd my human soul went down in flames.

I tore at her wrist, at the hold she had for me,
until the blood ran hot and I heard her cry out,
far, far beyond the curb of her will
to horizons of stars beyond the ringing hills of the world where the falcons nest
I saw, and I tore at her wrist with my savage beak.
I flew, as if sight flew from the anguish in her eye beyond her sight,
ent from my striking loose, from the cruel strike at her wrist,
striking out from the blood to be free of her.

My mother would be a falconress,
and even now, years after this,
when the wounds I left her had surely heald,
and the woman is dead,
her fierce eyes closed, and if her heart
were broken, it is stilld

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I would be a falcon and go free.
I tread her wrist and wear the hood,
talking to myself, and would draw blood.

Robert Duncan
Often I Am Permitted To Return To A Meadow

as if it were a scene made-up by the mind,
that is not mine, but is a made place,

that is mine, it is so near to the heart,
an eternal pasture folded in all thought
so that there is a hall therein

that is a made place, created by light
wherfrom the shadows that are forms fall.

Wherfrom fall all architectures I am
I say are likenesses of the First Beloved
whose flowers are flames lit to the Lady.

She it is Queen Under The Hill
whose hosts are a disturbance of words within words
that is a field folded.

It is only a dream of the grass blowing
east against the source of the sun
in an hour before the sun's going down

whose secret we see in a children's game
of ring a round of roses told.

Often I am permitted to return to a meadow
as if it were a given property of the mind
that certain bounds hold against chaos,

that is a place of first permission,
everlasting omen of what is.

Robert Duncan
Passage Over Water

We have gone out in boats upon the sea at night, lost, and the vast waters close traps of fear about us. The boats are driven apart, and we are alone at last under the incalculable sky, listless, diseased with stars.

Let the oars be idle, my love, and forget at this time our love like a knife between us defining the boundaries that we can never cross nor destroy as we drift into the heart of our dream, cutting the silence, slyly, the bitter rain in our mouths and the dark wound closed in behind us.

Forget depth-bombs, death and promises we made, gardens laid waste, and, over the wastelands westward, the rooms where we had come together bombd.

But even as we leave, your love turns back. I feel your absence like the ringing of bells silenced. And salt over your eyes and the scales of salt between us. Now, you pass with ease into the destructive world. There is a dry crash of cement. The light fails, falls into the ruins of cities upon the distant shore and within the indestructible night I am alone.

Robert Duncan
Neither our vices nor our virtues
further the poem. “They came up
and died
just like they do every year
on the rocks.”

The poem
feeds upon thought, feeling, impulse,
to breed itself,
a spiritual urgency at the dark ladders leaping.

This beauty is an inner persistence
toward the source
striving against (within) down-rushet of the river,
a call we heard and answer
in the lateness of the world
primordial bellowings
from which the youngest world might spring,
salmon not in the well where the
hazelnut falls
but at the falls battling, inarticulate,
blindly making it.

This is one picture apt for the mind.
A second: a moose painted by Stubbs,
where last year’s extravagant antlers
lie on the ground.
The forlorn moosey-faced poem wears
new antler-buds,
the same,

"a little heavy, a little contrived”,
his only beauty to be
all moose.

Robert Duncan
Rites Of Passage II

Something is taking place.
Horns thrust upward from the brow.
Hooves beat impatient where feet once were.
My son, youth grows alarming in your face.
Your innocent regard is cruelly charming to me now.
You bristle where my fond hand would stir
to stroke your cheek. I do not dare.

Irregular meters beat between your heart and mine.
Snuffling the air you take the heat and scan
the lines you take in going as if I were or were not there
and overtake me.
And where it seems but yesterday I spilld the wine,
you too grow beastly to become a man.

Peace, peace. I’ve had enough. What can I say
when song’s demanded? —I’ve had my fill of song?
My longing to sing grows full. Time’s emptied me.

And where my youth was, now the Sun in you grows hot, your day
is young, my place you take triumphantly. All along
it’s been for you, for this lowering of your horns in challenge. She
had her will of me and will not

let my struggling spirit in itself be free.

Robert Duncan
Styx

And a tenth part of Okeanos is given to dark night
a tithe of the pure water under earth
so that the clear fountains pour from rock face,
tears stream from the caverns and clefts,
down-running, carving wondrous ways in basalt resistance,
cutting deep as they go into layers of time-layerd
Gaia where She sleeps—

the cold water, the black rushing gleam, the
moving down-rush, wash, gush out over
bed-rock, toiling the boulders in flood,
purling in deeps, broad flashing in falls—

And a tenth part of bright clear Okeanos
his circulations— mists, rains, sheets, sheathes—
lies in poisonous depths, the black water.

Styx this carver of caverns beneath us is.
Styx this black water, this down-pouring.

The well is deep. From its stillness
the words our voices speak echo.
Resonance follows resonance.
Waves of this sounding come up to us.

We draw the black water, pure and cold.
The light of day is not as bright
as this crystal flowing.

Three thousand years we have recited its virtue
out of Hesiod.
Is it twenty-five thousand
since the ice withdrew from the lands and we
came forth from the realm of caverns where
the river beneath the earth we knew
we go back to.
Styx pouring down in the spring from its glacial remove,
from the black ice.

Fifty million years—from the beginning of what we are—
we knew the depth of this well to be.

Fifty million years deep —but our knowing deepens
—time deepens—
this still water

we thirst for in dreams we dread.

Robert Duncan
Such Is The Sickness Of Many A Good Thing

Was he then Adam of the Burning Way?
hid away in the heat like wrath
conceald in Love’s face,
or the seed, Eris in Eros,
key and lock
of what I was? I could not speak
the releasing
word. For into a dark
matter he came
and askt me to say what
I could not say. “I ..”

All the flame in me stopt
against my tongue.
My heart was a stone, a dumb
unmanageable thing in me,
a darkness that stood athwart
his need
for the enlightening, the
"I love you” that has
only this one quick in time,
this one start
when its moment is true.

Such is the sickness of many a good thing
that now into my life from long ago this
refusing to say I love you has bound
the weeping, the yielding, the
yearning to be taken again,
into a knot, a waiting, a string

so taut it taunts the song,
it resists the touch. It grows dark
to draw down the lover’s hand
from its lightness to what’s
underground.
Robert Duncan
The Song Of The Borderguard

The man with his lion under the shed of wars
sheds his belief as if he shed tears.
The sound of words waits -
a barbarian host at the borderline of sense.

The enamord guards desert their posts
harkening to the lion-smell of a poem
that rings in their ears.

-Dreams, a certain guard said
were never designd so
to re-arrange an empire.

Along about six o'clock I take out my guitar
and sing to a lion
who sleeps like a line of poetry
in the shed of wars.

The man shedding his belief
knows that the lion is not asleep,
does not dream, is never asleep,
is a wide-awake poem
waiting like a lover for the disrobing of the guard;
the beautil boundaries of the empire
naked, rapt round in the smell of a lion.

(The barbarians have passt over the significant phrase)

-When I was asleep,
   a certain guard says,
a man shed his clothes as if he shed tears
and appeard as a lonely lion
waiting for a song under the shed-roof of wars.

I sang the song that he waited to hear,
I, the Prize-Winner, the Poet Acclaimd.

Dear, Dear, Dear, Dear, I sang,
believe, believe, believe, believe.
The shed of wars is splendid as the sky,
houses our waiting like a pure song
housing in its words the lion-smell
of the beloved disrobed.

I sang: believe, believe, believe.

I the guard because of my guitar
belive. I am the certain guard,
certain of the Beloved, certain of the lion,
certain of the Empire. I with my guitar.
Dear, Dear, Dear, Dear, I sing.
I, the Prize-Winner, the Poet on Guard.

The borderlines of sense in the morning light
are naked as a line of poetry in a war.

Robert Duncan
What I Saw

The white peacock roosting
might have been Christ,
featherd robe of Osiris,
the radiant bird, a sword-flash,
percht in the tree
and the other, the fumed-glass slide
—were like night and day,
the slit of an eye opening in time
vertical to the horizon

Robert Duncan