

Occasional Note #2

Soul Canticles

I

αθανατος η ψυχη

In the bare beginning
between earth and sky,
a boy on a seacoast farm,
I found God's peace.
Stonewalls bounded, hayfields blessed,
and I could disappear for days
among the oaks that flanked the ridge,
could ramble down to swamp and fern,
or climb into the candelabra arms
of the great pine tree.
I moved in music--
bird, beast, bloom,
sun, moon, stars--
and green time swept me, head to feet,
shouldered me high and strode,
a grass blade in his teeth,
to any corner of the land I chose.

The seacoast, too, embraced me--
marsh, scrub, sand, and sedge--
and, slipping down my stride,
I'd climb the highest dune
to calibrate my kingdom come,
sparkling sea spread wide beyond,
redolent, piney woods behind.
There, between the salt fresh tides,
a shingled village strewn along the Point,
I stood, a king, and boxed
my boyhood compass true.

From this sandy citadel, two miles out,
the Spindle pole rose perfect
from a ledge awash with surge and hue,

and when I glimpsed this slender line against the sky,
my blood would leap and shout.
Yarn had a parrot kept a cage atop the shaft,
and squawked "keep off the rocks" to weary mariners.
I, a boy, believed, and wondered
who, then, fed the beacon bird, and was he ever lonely
in his windy perch?
And did he, one day, breach the bars and fly,
a clutch of brilliant color in the fog,
to some safe haven further south
where he now sounds a shrill alert
above the placid tropic blue?

I sailed, and, as I grew, grew bolder,
'til the Spindle marked my term.
With boat and dog I'd roam
the river ways and marsh,
then make for the harbor's mouth.
There, rounding the Point of Rocks,
seaswell lifting my bow, tide tugging board,
I'd spy that line and cage,
sheet in and hold her close
to the smoky sou'wester haze.
Behind, the coast would fall away,
the bathers tiny specks along the beach,
and I, a pilgrim on the briny deep,
weather and sail my sole salvation,
would bear straight out to sea.

Always the rounding magnificent,
the game to see how close to the growling rocks to come,
a glance if just perchance the parrot had returned,
then sheets paid out as the boat swung off the wind
and drove for home.

In such times sea, sun, sky, and earth sufficed.
How little I knew was of no account--
the firmament itself was love.

II

Wherever two, or more, are gathered

Yet somewhere in these years
the heart set out to break,
feet stepped beyond the bounds,
began the climb.
Perhaps a dream, or shadow,
sliding shy behind your eyes,
disturbed this innocence,
or yearning stirred your limbs.
Perhaps the stars stopped singing
and darkness figured shapes
that twined their arms around you,
drew you out beyond the ring of fire,
promising the world.

Somehow you knew to thread among the rocks
and pick a course through boulders
seemingly set to thwart.
Never did you guess the path
would one day swallow light,
for Lady Luck conspired
and every turn revealed a vista
redolent and new, bequeathed you
power and an upstart joy.
Only later, when dusk with its shadings
crept along the ledges, or lit on
overhanging branches to attend
your least false move,
did you suddenly recall
the unkind face at the window
and whispers low behind the wall.

The deeper you traveled, the more you tasted,
the more you could not keep from grasping,
darting here, now there-- this, now that--
to sate your ravening appetite.
You grew through things and places,

peopled your life with pleasure,
drained each glass as if it were the last.

Yet slowly, imperceptible, the darkness
gathered in the corners of your eyes,
outlines dimmed that once had been so clear,
and shadow shrouded even those you loved.
At first you struggled to contain the shades,
forged on to brighter climes,
but in the end such easy manly strength
failed its muster and among these swirling agonies
you foundered, offered up your breath, became a ghost.
Now dying consecrates the world, fate confounds,
you fall through whorls of midnight without one star
and stumble, senseless, in your stammered mind.
And only when the shadows stretch the longest,
quite suddenly you burst from blank oblivion
into land you had not seen before,
though its beauty hovered constant at your side
and the course across it called your name.

Who has not known this sundering
and reach of some great hand through darkness
to lift you where you lay exhausted-- by fear,
by struggle, by silent discontent?
You bow in humble gratitude before such blessing,
then press on.
dark/light, day/night,
some point within coheres
and lets you swing between the poles more easily.
Your heart revives and room to breathe appears,
your body reassembles, mind renews.
Somehow the way is clear,
though still the path leads on through rock,
and starlight rules.

III

To save all sentient beings

Just after death the room is quietest,
breath sucked in before such peace.
Right here the path turns back upon itself,
begins to narrow and descend.
One steps more gently, circumspect,
the taste of dying on the tongue.
One sits more often by the dusty road,
letting the pilgrims pass--
these folk in ragged clothes,
children hungry, old ones
stooped with loss.
One leaves the cry unanswered,
rather rests, eyes wide,
to witness all that shimmers
between earth and sky.
One measures every step with breath--
no rush to grasp the fleeting day--
but rather strolls with empty hands,
content to watch all happening rise
and fall away.
One travels light,
dispensing burdens at each turn.
Older, one stanches wounds with pardon,
lets holy imperfection be.
Still, the path winds down
through cypress trees,
spreads its turnings in meander
graced by equanimity.
One's willing now to be alone upon the road--
by night the stars, by day fierce sun, or rain.
One learns to praise their progress
and to cherish emptiness as love.

One waits at crossroads, patient,
trusting no one path leads home.
With the way itself obscured,
one turns and turns again unceasing,
while the great poles roar and whisper
in the now well-tempered heart.

IV

Love Now

Strange this journey leading
in the end no where but here,
the path our breathing,
the road our blood.
Yet every step is needed to arrive
where beauty inundates our veins,
suffuses living flesh with darkened light.
No wonder we, so long the wanderers,
can't see at first we're home,
and reach among our gatherings
for further guidance and a map of God.
It seems we've garnered just the things
we needed to resume our way--
wisdom, knowledge, skill, endurance--
but no route opens-- up, or down--
no inner finger points, or probes,
no voice conspires to draw us on.
And yet such sweetness now surrounds,
such nearby celebration,
we scarce can breathe--
no more from ancient fear,
but from this standing still
so close to God.
Amazed, we wonder can this be--
our bodies rooted in the firmament,
sun, moon, stars, and earth confiding
in our hearts and minds?
What is this marvel of a world

that no more falls away
and leaves us longing,
but presses close to see
its cherished progeny?
Stunned by love, we sense
the primal innocence returned,
but nearby dark still spreads its wings.
No, this is new, unknown and intricate,
something of earthy fuse and force
that pours through every living thing.

Here, yes, here is home at last!
We step across the threshold stone,
alive as we have never been,
yet somehow also knowing this was ours
at every step along the way.
And God, who once embraced,
then bade farewell, is here again
so near we breathe together one vast love.

O who can say when earth will end?
Not I, nor you, nor one,
but some sweet breath
that sweeps the planet's face
to keep us company as we lose
and find again our O so ever
human grace.