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Reading notes for 2nd Wind 2001

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WHAT RUSHES BY US
AFTER THE DEFECTION OF MEANING
FROM THE BEGINNING

ALONG THE STREET
MY BROTHER'S ANGER
BEYOND THE MOUNTAINS
COIN OF THE REALM

AT THE CENTER
VEGETABLE 69
EXCEPT AT THE WINDOW

(SEPTEMBER 13, 1939)
SEXUAL INSTRUCTION
PENIS

(Maybe OLD HANDS)

THE RIVER BASIN, THE RAPIDS
Greetings, congrats, etc.

Only this morning I was saying to a friend of mine that at last I felt some faint hope that maybe the United States really would wait to be sure that the whole Arab world was with us, and that maybe we would act as a joint Arab and Western alliance to bring Bin Laden to a real International Tribunal. Well, maybe that's still possible, and I'm glad we're at least not targeting civilians, but I'm really scared.

Nevertheless, I think I'll go on more or less with the program I'd thought of before.

A couple of days ago a short story writer from Arkansas emailed me to tell me that she'd spent the entire weekend after the terrorist attack sitting on the floor listening to Bach and Otis Redding and reading and rereading W.H. Auden and a poem of mine she said told her all she needed to know about what it was like being in the Twin Towers. Well, parts of the poem may have reminded her of what happened on September 11, but I wrote that poem in the early 80's, and I certainly never intended it to be anything even remotely like what happened to those towers. And the poem's not really about death, either; if it's about anything, it's about life. But then, to live is finally to die. And how fast it all goes. It can be a great trip — as long as it's not cut short by a terrorist attack — but even so, we're all falling, we're all falling...

WHAT RUSHES BY US — WIND 14
And here's a poem which was really written during a war - the Viet Nam war, as a matter of fact. Called - the first televised war in history, I think it was...

AFTER THE DEFECTION OF MEANING - TRAIL 14

But it doesn't take a war -- an old one or a new one -- to give me the feeling, sometimes, and not just right now, either -- that the world really is going crazy. That no one's "running it" -- or at least no one trustworthy. Before I read the next poem, I need to remind you of Foerster's novel, A PASSAGE TO INDIA whose core is, you remember, the very chastening experience of a bunch of Englishmen in the Mysterious East -- most especially the character of Mrs. Moore, who's on a sort of spiritual quest which ends disastrously, in the Malabar caves where, looking for enlightenment, all she hears echoing back at her from the walls is her own name — EsMissEsMoore, EsMissEsMoore, the way the Indians pronounce it. And the experience is so disturbing to her that, on the ship heading back to England, in flight from India, she can't get it out of her head. Here's a poem from my most recent book, AS EARTH BEGINS TO END.

FROM THE BEGINNING - AEBTE 26

And yet, even though the whole universe may seem to be bent on the destruction of everything we hold dear, that still doesn't mean WE shouldn't try to make our own lives and the lives of others as comfortable as we can. We cannot simply sit back and let God, or George, or the government (which in this case is George), do it for us. Here's a poem I wrote when we were living in Mexico, where the rule used to be that the last place to go if you're in trouble, had an accident or something, is the police station. It's called

ALONG THE STREET - PB 31
And here's another poem about how hard it is to recognize other people's suffering, called

**BEYOND THE MOUNTAINS – PB 26**

When we were living in Mexico I remember, too, how very heavily upholstered, fat, padded with comfort the United States always seemed to be when I came back to visit...and yet what cold wells of sterility and despair all that comfortableness seemed to be covering up.

**MY BROTHER'S ANGER – PB 13**

Well, it's my belief that we've **got** to climb those ugly mountains, we've got to make ourselves uncomfortable, got to think about the poor of the world, and most of all think about what we're doing **ourselves** – before it's too late. Unfortunately this is a poem which is much closer to home than Mexico.

**COIN OF THE REALM – PB 23**
That's what I'm really terrified of, the very real possibility that any massive military strike we make might escalate into a **global** nuclear war.

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Now, not to make this all darkness and gloom, I want to read you a few brand new little poems, poems written in the 2 ½ years since the death of my dear husband Leonard. I've been writing lots of much longer and more difficult poems too, but I thought these would be nice as a sort of breather. The first one I want to dedicate this one — they've seen it, so I know they won't mind — to Caroline and Fred Haefele and their children, Phoebe and Towbin.

**AT THE CENTER**

Well, it's been — it is — a very strange time in my life. Strange living, and strange writing. Sometimes I think I don't really know what I'm doing...

**VEGETABLE 69**
- Well, LBJ may have been joking, but actually what he did takes us right to the heart of how easily self love—self love alone—can and does endanger the whole world.

And finally, for my last poem I want to read another brand new poem. I’m reading it for all the victims of the terrorist attack, for the dead terrorists themselves, as well as all the dead this "New War" will bring home to us—but most especially for their but mostly for their "survivors", as we say: all the husbands and wives and mothers and fathers and children and sisters and brothers and other relatives and friends they leave behind them, all over the world. And for ourselves here in Missoula. It’s called

THE RIVER BASIN, THE RAPIDS
"But why," Jane asks, "is something silly at best
And objectively ugly at worst,
The focus of so much infatuation?"

Shrewd and aloof, women are thought to enjoy
What it does, the petulant master
They devour, or the wheedling spongy slave
They finally love to rub the wrong way.

And men? Men are known to appreciate
What it stands for. History books have this
In common with off-the-rack pulp romances.
Small men with big ones, big men with small,
Lead lives of quiet compensation, power
Surging up from or meekly mizzling
Down to the trouser snake in their paradise.

If love's the religion with the god
That fails, is it because blood goes to his head?
No, it's that after the night's tom-toms
And fire dances are over and he's sulking
In his shrine, sadness beats him hollow.

Asked by nagging reporters once too often
Why, despite the count of body bags,
We were in Vietnam, LBJ unzipped
His fly and slapped it on the table.

"Gentlemen, this is why," he barked. "This is why."
And the next to last poem is a fairly discursive, intellectually curious – not to say salacious poem – but it's so long I'm only going to read the last section of it. Published in *TriQuarterly Review*, and it's written by J.D. McClatchy, the very respectable editor of *The Yale Review*, a gentleman who also edited one of those yearly *BEST AMERICAN POETRY* anthologies – I forget which year. And the poem's called

PENIS
I sit in one of the dives
On Fifty-Second Street
Uncertain and afraid
As the clever hopes expire
Of a low dishonest decade:
Waves of anger and fear
Circulate over the bright
And darkened lands of the earth,
Obsessing our private lives;
The unmentionable odour of death
Offends the September night.

(But) Into this neutral air
Where blind skyscrapers use
Their full height to proclaim
The strength of Collective Man,
Each language pours its vain
Competitive excuse:
But who can live for long
In an euphoric dream;
Out of the mirror they stare,
Imperialism's face
And the International wrong.

Faces along the bar
Cling to their average day:
The lights must never go out,
The music must always play,
All the conventions conspire
To make this fort assume
The furniture of home:
Lest we should see where we are,
Lost in a haunted wood,
Children afraid of the night
Who have never been happy or good.

(stanza break)
The windiest militant trash
Important Persons shout
Is not so crude as our wish:
What mad Nijinsky wrote
About Diaghilev
Is true of the normal heart;
For the error bred in the bone
Of each woman and each man
Craves what it cannot have,
Not universal love
But to be loved alone.

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- (for a reading) - "The trouble is, of course, if you only concentrate on yourself, your own hurts, it's all too easy not to care what you're doing to other people
Six feet by three feet patch
swells upward, slightly
greener toward the chest.

Polka dots, plastic carnations.

Behind, tall wheat,
some pines, a ragged fence.

And the occasional clink clunk of the cow bells we hung here
once, when we came out
with Phoebe and Tobin, two blonde babies tumbling, one still at the breast.

But now you are nowhere in evidence, down there
dressed in the green sweater I knitted for you
when we first met.

On the horizon, 350 degrees of raw mountains;
the passing brush of wind --
sunshine's glint.

At the center, a handful of whiskey
wild roses in a pot

and a clump of sunflowers that burns
like a yellow warning light, stuck, swinging
in the middle of a deserted intersection

surrounded by old ranch houses, faint flecks of snow
still visible on the mountains.
So please, everyone, go in peace. And in hopes that we'll still, somehow, find a way to punish the criminal, not the whole country; the criminals, not all their innocent friends and family and countrymen, wherever they may be.
Now for the last group I want to really change things and read you four more poems, three of which involve love and sex and were written by three male poets, two of whom I actually knew. The first is by my husband, Leonard Wallace Robinson. Wish I could read it as well as he used to - but some of you may remember him reading it.

SEXUAL INSTRUCTION – WHALE 54

For the second poem I'm going to read some excerpts from the Auden poem my Arkansas friend was reading – as were an awful lot of other people, especially in New York, if you trust The New York Times. Auden lived in New York, you know, and the poem starts there, on the verge of the 2nd World War.

SEPTEMBER 1, 1939
EXCEPT AT THE WINDOW

crack of dawn in the bathroom
as usual at the sink
blear eyed rifle ache of waking
washing the face saying Yes, Okay
come along little soul,
co-pilot, distant friend from the womb
pick up your needles whisper what was meant
from the beginning present
and then not and then again, this
slight rustle in the brain-rigging hint
of an off-shore breeze in the chest-sails

next minute at breakfast
gone slack forgot
in an hour or two back
in sync again for another
star turn glowing who said
filaments can’t burn even when the light’s off who said connection

means to be lost well
it is dammit what’s happened
to it now here’s only
the silk lining of the ring box
where the swift, unsalted one

(no stanza break)
all day comes and goes humming
fitfully it's a relationship
not a thing

thumbnail creature that won't
stand still
except at the window pale lip
of the mind flower next second
off again but be patient put honey out
at noon try sighing intermittently

don't worry about attending
to everything just remember
every little while tap at the door
of the busy, crammed with duties
can't stop head, the chock full
redbreast pounding for air a little room to sit
still sometimes something will say
hello take my hand this is
what is meant and then not and then again
follow