Innocence
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To my brother Richard, and in memory of our brother, Ron
... he was a true Poet, and of the Devil's party without knowing it.
—William Blake
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THE ROPE WAS INNOCENT

and the ass, the two man-servants
below on the plain, the ram,
the wood, the knife,
the fire. The pit, the rack,
the bullwhip—all the instruments

were innocent: iron slept
cold in the ground. But love
was not innocent. It was love
who gave the order and love
who obeyed, carried and stacked

the wood, offered wrists and
ankles for the binding. Love
prepared the fire and raised
the knife, and it was love
who lowered it. Bless the animals,

who live without mercy: the ape
with her beautiful breasts
nursing her young, the tethered
ram, and the ass grazing there
in the lowlands—little wooly ass

who cannot pray, who hears only
the braying of wind in the grass
and when death comes with its smell
of lion, answers: Here am I,
and falls to its knees without wonder.
THE INFANT KING

We bring him the best foods,
bundles of embroidered gowns,
soft, soft, a servant

kisses the ruddy feet,
brushes away with leafy fans
the sycophantic flies

flattering the air
around his shoulders.
He has nothing to do all day

but bask in the amplitude
of our affection,
from his throne of batting

to observe the curtains
luffing on currents of air, survey
the troops of grass parading and standing.

Why, then, is he unhappy? Why
does he weep? And why,
if he is indeed a king,
as the idylls of our love
have promised, do we banish him
to his room each night, swaddled

in silence, and dipping him
into the moving dark, consign him
to the vastness of the other kingdom?
I AM TALKING TO YOU ABOUT LOVE

The butcher has gone mad and begun to write. He has taped a yellow envelope of poems to his meat-case window with a sign saying, *Take one*. And if you obey, you will find yourself collared by a man with rumpled hair, a cleaver of light in his pale blue eyes. *See?* He will say. *Do you see?* His poems are penciled in a rough hand, signed like gospel: *Mark,* and this is Mark, who stops you, breathing like a bull from two soft nostrils, who perspires, who is talking to you about Love, who is happy, whose happiness feels like hunger and if you do not accede on the spot, he might love you too hard, he might stuff you back down in the sausage. *Yes.* In the shadowy meat-case his ham hocks and knuckles lie bloodless, pale. Voices have entered this man and fill him beyond skin's endurance. And now, you too hear voices: *Back away!* *Away!* As you cycle home, a road sign hollers *STOP* A bright red canister left out on your doorstep reads: *IN CASE OF FIRE. For the butcher,* you think. And then, *Have mercy.*
THE WHITE MEAL

Lord, give us food for angels and invalids,
poets and madwomen, all who find
the savor of this world too strong—
mourners and saints and those volatile souls
whose joy ignites dangerous fevers; for these
a cloud, a polished bone, a cup of snow
is sustenance enough. Spread them a tablecloth

clean as the page of an unwritten book
and serve upon crockery
plain as a nurse, the clear broth
of memory, skim milk of exile,
cooked grains and potted cheeses, purées
shred from pale roots, breast-meat,
slivered from the bony tent.

Let this feast be lean as Pharaoh’s
seven dream-cows, humble to bless
the blue feet of the starving and let
each vessel, passed from hand to hand
above our plates, inscribe a circle
over circles. Let no clamorous spice,
no storm of seasoning distract these diners

from their secret craving—to hear
a mother’s tongue toll again
in the rhythms of childhood, see steam
rising from the earliest soup, sunlight
flashing from a spoon, raised—
as lighthouse over waves—
a beacon for the hungry voyager.
THE INNOCENT

Alone and together, we stand on the platform
a mob of strangers awaiting a train. There may be
among us a wife-beater; surely, a thief. That man
in the blue dolphin tie; that frazzled woman,
gathering in her scattered girls; each of us caught
in the swill of our being; none of us blameless,
not one of us pure. Greedy, covetous,
selfish, vain, we have trafficked in lies; we
have practiced small cruelties. Even the baby,
asleep in a sling on his mother’s breast,
has been willful, has shaken with rage.

Yet, if fate arrives, as a wind, in a bullet,
a bomb, at the instant of shock, in the silent
heart of conflagration, we will all
be transformed into innocents, cleansed
in the fires of violence, punished not for any sins
committed—but for standing where we stand,
together in the soft, the vulnerable flesh.