***Montaigne and I***

*A notebook entry on the ontology of selfhood*

 *becomes a dialogue with the dead as, thinking*

 *of Montaigne, I find myself invoking him.*

1.

A sane and very humourous fellow

 In his round tower, walls emblazoned

 With aphorisms, all-occasioned

And all-illuminating. Mellow,

As well, his mind and temperament,

 So frank and easy, utterly

 Without pretension, wholly free

Of ideological sediment.

Shakespeare transformed you into Prince

 Hamlet, after he’d taken you

 Into himself. Ah, what to do

If you’re the Prince, what could convince

You to kill Claudius, the hated

 Usurper? In your thoughtful headiness

 You find a way to die in readiness,

Faithful, but still, not quite persuaded.

 *Warming up to my subject…*

2.

How sceptical a wonderer

 You were, Michel (if you don’t mind),

 And with the genius of a kind

Nature. A little outside you were

At all times, saw from many angles.

 So full of curiosity

 And kidney stones, the agony

Of passing water. A question dangles

Its head, shy flower atop its dot,

 Over each paragraph you write.

 Doubt makes you question even the white

Man’s precedence, his gains ill-got

From those colonial escapades.

 Your mother’s mother’s anguish was

 Expulsion from her Spain, because

She was a Jew. You knew ‘in spades’

The lot of those out on the borders

 Of the Community, the Power.

 They could be undone in an hour

By some king’s mercenary orders,

One’s family ties, one’s history,

 Places familiar and dear,

 Wealth, rank, and reputation clear…

If all this could be instantly

Expunged, what in this world is real

 Or solid? What can we assume?

 Nothing. What do we know? A Doom

Of sorts is coming that will seal

Up all in rest. The little doom

 Of private death. The Judgment Days

 That Revolution sets ablaze.

Heat death and universal gloom

At the end of Epicurean time,

 When clocks stand still and measure nothing.

 Then all the less a thing of loathing,

Life, ah, the beautiful and sublime!

3.

*My father sent me, when I was*

 *A boy of tender years, to live*

 *Awhile with peasants. And I give*

*Thanks everyday for this, because*

*It taught me that the human lot*

 *Is common to the high and low,*

 *Which nobles little care to know.*

*But everyday I gave a thought*

*To those whose suffering and strength*

 *Was all they had of earthly good:*

 *To milk the cows, to gather wood,*

*To huddle through a winter’s length.*

*But you, like many of our class,*

 *Saw the poor as commodities.*

 *When pleasure had been wrung from these,*

*On you would blithely, cruelly pass.*

*Such attitudes as these condemn*

 *The poor to added bitterness,*

 *Being* paid *for their worthlessness.*

*And yet you died as one of them!*

Ducunt volentem fata, nolentem trahunt.

*One ought to feel compassion for*

 *Oneself. Only compassion knows.*

 *Through sympathy our knowledge grows,*

*Values both* otium *and chore.*

*The dogmatist, a tyrant in*

 *The world of spirit, never feels*

 *The self-doubt that alone reveals.*

*To cast a stone is the worst sin.*

*One ought to be bemused and tender,*

 *Make of what is one’s level best,*

 *And seize the day! which, gone,* nox est

Perpetua una dormienda*.*

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