

Order of the Ordinary

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JOE FRANCIS DOERR



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*For Cat—
Il faut aller vois*

*And for my parents,
Jim & Marilyn Doerr*

*Mi Taku Oyasin
J'errant in fire by name*

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Order of the Ordinary

1.

Byhrtnoth prepares the vellum
skinside, hairside, skinside
by the thick reek of tallow smoke;
tousured pate beaded with his labor
recto, verso, recto

 mumbling in the curing cell.
Rafters sag with sheepskins.

And there is the hide of the ram
slaughtered near the holy well.

Here are stacks of the black ewe fleeced
and thinly sliced,
dried to near transparency;
hairside, skinside, hairside.

Brother Byhrtnoth of the discerning eye
checks for holes, for slight depressions
 where ink might pool,
and fingers a motley tracing of veins—
 fine, finer, too thick, piebald—
from margin to margin, rejecting the stained
for the soon to be.

2.

The placing of the vellum hairside up.

The pricking of the three holes, beacons.

The delineating of the margins.

The ruling of the shallow guidelines: one score & six per recto.

The burnishing of the skinside with a blunted length of bone.

The mixing of the powdered mare's blood with the oak gall &
water.

The cutting of the quill: horn-tipped wing-feather of a brindle
cob.

The angling of the quill-tip just so for writing.

The splitting of the quill-tip for the ink run, gutter.

The wrapping of the quill-tip with a horse hair buttress.

The submerging of the implement in the half-full stoneware.

The shaking of the surplus gall from the stylus.

The resting of the hand beside the verso.

The beginning of the supreme moment of doubt:

4.

At last, the fitful sleeping:
nightmares, other creatures
classified by newfound order:

- i. belonging to the Queen of Tantrums
- ii. embalmed with brine & lambswool
- iii. tame, but lacking shelter

- iv. suckling pigs & heifers
- v. hedgehogs, mice, badgers
- vi. those picked from bedclothes

- vii. dragons, fish & eels
- viii. those of use to plowmen
- ix. those of use to scribes

- x. that which upsets my inkwell
- xi. the cat that shares my table
- xii. unborn colts & asses

Letters to Woodhenge

Why the Earth Shakes

A good friend of mine believes
the pre-Colombian gods
have broken their ranks of slumber
to bind again with rattlesnakes
the backbone of our continent.

They have removed the sainted masks
assigned to them by conquest,
dusted off obsidian blades,
and painted their priested clowns
for war with buffalo tail brushes.

He claims they've set Wyoming's
medicine wheels in motion,
de-christened Cahokia
as the Mississippi bleeds, then
uprooted Mound City beneath the woodhenge sky.

The Piasa Bird circles
over Illinois bean fields.
And Quetzalcoatl
introduces himself
to border patrolmen with a switchblade and a smile.

The pale boulder which powdered
wild bones to grist for white bread
while Coyote's powers slept
is rolling to an end, he says.
In his eyes, the wild children play on quiet stones.

[Introit]

When the magalonyx & mastodon, the bones of which are now dug up, were still extant in this land of bluffs & prairies, there existed, it is said, a bird of such dimensions that it could, in its talons, easily carry off a full grown deer or swallow whole—hoofs, hide, and horns—an antelope or buffalo. Having obtained a taste of human flesh, from that time on it would prey on nothing else. Artful as it was powerful, it would dart without warning upon a man, woman, or child and bear such off into one of the caves it haunted hewn & ragged in the bluff above the river, where it would devour the misfortunate soul. Hundreds of warriors tried for years to destroy it, but all were unsuccessful. Whole villages were nearly wiped out, and consternation spread throughout all the tribes of the Illini.