

YUKON GOLD

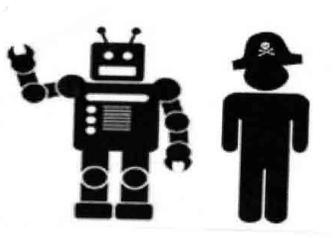


POEMES DE TERRE

1970-2010

WITH A KEY TO THE MYSTERIES

Mike Finley



Robots & Pirates

YUKON GOLD: Poemes de terre is free. But if you wish to make a donation to Robots & Pirates, the anti-suicide foundation founded by Mike and Rachel in the wake of Daniele's death, use this link. We offer counseling, followup, group presentations, [an online presence](#) and direct funding. Donations are not tax-deductible at this time, but be assured that all money will be spent helping Twin Cities punks get through hard times.

<http://mfinley.com/daniele/robots.htm>

Or mail your donation to: Robots & Pirates, c/o Mike Finley, 1841 Dayton Avenue, St. Paul MN 55104

About the cover:

Four Yukon Gold potatoes represent the four members of my family. A spud is laid out horizontally, representing the death of one. These are poems about family and growth, art and truth, life and death, God and no-God. The potatoes suggest Rachel's Arctic (Yukon) experiences as well as our generally Hibernian (Irish) orientation. Gold suggests "the best" – this is a selected works. *Poemes de terre*, of course, is a play on *pommes de terre* – potatoes themselves, bursting with protein, being heartfelt songs from the earth, from which we all sprout, and to which we all return.

Why this book is unlike any other book.

Yukon Gold follows in the tradition of *Leaves of Grass* and *Songs of Innocence and Experience* – self-made and self-renewing. It is re-published week-to-week, each time purer.

The book contains not just text but annotations, encyclopedic citations, and "behind the mask" insights about what things mean, or don't mean. Obscurities are resolved, indulgences sought.

Yukon Gold is pure multimedia. Over 70 of the items include video versions. Click on the blue headline and the page's YouTube counterpart appears on your screen.

Yukon Gold is interactive. If you hate a page, or every single page, there is a mechanism to relay your unhappiness to the author and to other unhappy readers. All complaints will be published online, without delay or moderation. Unless you use it to sell discount Viagra.

Yukon Gold is an online tome. It can be read and linked to anywhere there is an IP connection. No trees were pulped to make its pages. No bush, no slash, not a single twig.

Yukon Gold is 100% free. No money has changed hands in the creation of this gritty saga, or will.

There will be no remainders table at Barnes & Noble, and no secondary marketplace at Amazon.com. This nonconformance breaks the back of the man. We do not dwell on the grid.

As an added inducement, this book contains an authenticated signature by W. H. Auden.

Topics covered herein:

Hitler Enters Austria, 1939
The Vandalism of Thoreau's Grave
The Sacking of Troy
The Great Hunger 1846-47
Anton's Syndrome
Norm Coleman Concedes, 2009
Black Holes Explained
Pelagius of Venice
Bernal Diaz and the Battle
of Otumba
The Nature of the Dust Devil
Being the Pope
The Wild Man of Borneo
The Business of Bees
The Newmans of Westport
Auden in Minnesota, 1974
The Wreck of the Hesperus
Farewell, Curtis Hotel
Jack Kerouac's Will
The Song of Catherine of Sienna
The Lazarus Cheese
Alien Abduction
Understanding Frankenstein
Is There NASCAR in Heaven?
The College of Poets
Buick Century
Moab
Proof of God
The Reason We Exist
What To Do When You
Encounter A Bear
The Irish Potato Famine
The Homeric Inheritance

YUKON GOLD

Poemes de Terre

1970-2010

With Videos; Plus

A Key to the Mysteries

by

Mike Finley

*for Daniele, with greatest love,
and for Jon, who is my strength*

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ISBN No. 978-0-615-39893-8



Videos

To see videos: click on [hyperlinked](#) titles

To spend actual money:

Buy [Zombie Girl](#) – a multimedia fable in PDF format about the life of an unusual girl, Daniele Finley. Proceeds go to Robots & Pirates, Mike's foundation for helping Twin Cities punks in trouble. \$4.95

Explanation

This book is my 'last will and testicle,' to quote John Lennon. Everything of value that I have written that has line breaks. Anyone can have anything of mine they like, at no charge. Everything must go. These prices are not guaranteed in perpetuity.

There is a companion prose tome, [A Cellarful of Nose](#), essays and stories.

Comments

Are welcome To me this collection is like *Leaves of Grass*, a work-in-progress to its last day. If you have an idea, and it's not too cruel, I want to hear it.

What has been said ...

*'In no one else's poems, except Vallejo's,
do I sense such great desire
straining at the limits of words.'*

Michael Cuddihy
IRONWOOD, 1977

*'Mike Finley is the angry young man
of American poetry.'*

Helge Schotz-Christensen
MOONS & LION TAILS, 1978

"Mike Finley - best fricken poet since Carl Sandburg"
[the Baker Klecko, 2011](#)

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death everything let away man want now
around god never love one
first house write arms
sun Every three snow
Like friends
always place bed car
bad friend town makes
years people left
Soul head another
SEE thing better got feet
read face really
room kind year
later end long
even two night
something black body
teeth might moment home back
came still water cold old come coming little
fir blue young must gone soul live
great thought
light across road world things
poets Now blood look think
eyes hands get hear hand eye
open
knew day just next find
men green know
high feel
trees last new bell full dead window
air inside life take look heart
children poem morning goes made turn good saw mother behind much hard ever
dark need dog right behind much hard ever
knows red
knows red
knows red

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This Wordle graphic shows the words most commonly used in *Yukon Gold*.

Poet's Foreword

I am not a successful writer or famous poet. I am someone who has been around a long time and never even found an audience. So where do I get off issuing any selected works, much less a giant one?

The answer is, screw you. This being America, it's my dollar, and I can do with it what I like.

More to the point, at age 60, and having had to face in the past year one of the most difficult events any person can face – the suicide of a child – I have been in need of rebirthing, of re-purposing. There have been days when this project was the only thing that kept me from joining Daniele.

My friends have had to endure me and my work for years. What champs they are. They don't even like poetry – as if anyone does, really – but they have stuck with me and my scribbled lines for forty years, and administered the occasional chuck to the chin that kept me respiring.

Not a favor to literature, perhaps, but a hell of a favor to me, and I hope you guys know how grateful I am, and how lucky I was to be loved by you. Please never doubt that. I would write it in my blood. And then make you read it.

As for the rest, what might this mean to you. Pray God you are not tested like I have been. It is better to lose two legs and an arm than to lose your child to despair. Nothing is normal again. So far.

Now for the controversy. Many of my poems run to the bleak side, especially the old ones, but the recent ones are no day in the sunshine either.

Did I therefore, encourage negativity or suicidality on my daughter? Again, that's not really any of your business, but I have seen how literature works, and it likes to fasten on shit like this. Ted and Sylvia. Tom and Viv.

I believe this. That the world is a rough place, that we are on our own, and that God is walled up in his mansion, unable to swoop down to assist us.

In this rough place, a sense of humor comes in handy. Daniele had it in spades. But she had a bad day August 18, and neither God nor Hallmark cards could save her that day.

I miss her like you would not believe. She was my treasure. And this collection is for her ... and about her ... and a riddle for us all. How can there be such catastrophic pain? And how did we see it coming, so clearly, so far in advance?

MIKE FINLEY
St. Paul, August 2010

Bookend: My Chrestomathy ¹

*This is what I commend
to you, make good use
of the brick-in-hand*

*Useful learning
weighted by wood pulp,
is what's its meaning*

*A poem wants to be a joke
like Midas' spud –
like I'm one to talk*

*But here is evidence of a crime,
my darling DNA,
I pray someone finds*

*Who stole the baloney
that hung curled
in the balcony.*

*I miss that dear bird
it was my only chance
to be similarly cured.*

¹ *Chrestomathy* is a librarian's word for "compendium," which is what this book is. It is all the junk that kept coming back to me. The central conceit is that the death of my daughter Daniele in 2009 – dear bird that she was – has necessitated a rearrangement of this material. After this, it goes into the sea.

Dream ² *

I wake around noon in the crook of a tree
my mouth is full of cocoons

crickets sing as I amble through
the milkweed field

passing my hands
through sticky stems

all around the sunflowers frown
heads bowed like periscopes

hummingbirds zip from blossom
to blossom

later I climb back up to sleep
each cattail vigilantly mans his post

the trees throw out
their birds and breathe

2 14 Poems a Dollar (1974)

* I had written poems before this, but this poem was the first that felt like I was onto something. It was the idea of casting a spell, of creating a psychological environment. For a while, this was all I tried to do.

Salesmen ³

Have surrounded your home,
They sleep in shifts, handcuffed
To black satchels.
They demand one of your party hostage,
But you are alone.
You send them a message, 'No Deals.'
Tonight your attempted escape
Was anticipated.
As they gather around the car,
You turn up the volume,
Wheels spinning tirelessly.

The Movie Under the Blindfold ⁴

When the seams ripped on the starboard side
Passengers screamed and sailed across the aisle.
Newspaper accounts stressed that no
Immediate impact was felt.
Instead, steel met steel, rock passed through steel,
Steel slid like strips of steel across rock.

There in the water I first saw the bridge,
It shimmered in the air like a bridge
Made of water, and over the bridge was
A bridge in the air, and over that
Bridge there was water;
I swam.

I passed underneath and made my way, stroking,
To a nearby island that was the head and shoulders
Of my wife rising out of the sea like a woman.

Weeks passed, the swelling went down.
Layer after layer fell off me like skin.
I shrank and I shrank until finally I
Was no greater than a man.

Then in broad daylight I found my feet,
When they stood and tested
Dry land.

4 The Movie Under the Blindfold (1978)

Bells Are Ringing ⁵ *

I trod the air and think about the sun.
Stars for friends and supper for the grass.
Let me say how happy I am – very.
Peaceful like I was never born, and maybe I wasn't.
Like as if I was dead, and who's to say I'm not?
Someone popped the blister.
I was here, and poof I'm gone.
Possibly a pretzel and the salt's
Flecked off and I never was baked
or tied in a knot or ground into flour.
I'm still out there waving in a field.
Or maybe my fingers are just tiny bones,
strung on string and banging in the breeze.

5 Doctor Newyear (1973)

* Doctor Newyear was another character I invented to write behind. It was inspired by a French political drawing from the 1830s depicting a hippo at a formal dinner offering a toast. He was a goofball. I published this book and its predecessor, 14 Poems a Dollar, each in one day, at an Insty Prints store in Minneapolis. The entire book, 100 copies, cost under \$25. I thought, literature is a cinch!

The Rose ⁶

I am the fallow-eyed angel
next to your bed, s
I glide toward you silent
as anti-words at night,
and give you, O my dusky one,
kisses cold as the moon
and the serpent's embrace.

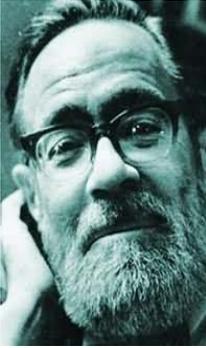
Morning will come
but I will be gone,
my place will be cold
all day.

Let others tap at your hollow
with light knuckles.
Me, I reign
by terror.

6 The Movie Under the Blindfold (1978)

Pathetic Fallacy ⁷ *

The event was as successful as a fire.
People came from all across town.
Shuffled their feet, doused him with water,
stuck him in dirt, and when they were sure
he was out, dead out, they went home.
Gnash teeth, wring hands, get drunk, see hell.
Even the birds in the trees are pissed off.
Even the moon's gone to stand in the corner.



7 The Movie Under the Blindfold (1978)

* I wanted to cultivate a non-literary audience, but I made it hard for them by naming a poem 'Pathetic fallacy,' a scholarly term for when nature imitates human emotion – the rain mourning, etc. This poem is about John Berryman's funeral – which I did not attend. Didn't even know the man, though I knocked on his door once. But what a phrase, even if you don't know its civilized meaning. Both words are like hockers coming at you!

New Friend ⁸ *

in midmay the springtime
stops holding its breath
the trees light up like
fireworks of green
the screen doors slam like
the first time ever

winter was hard, the car
got crashed, my bike got
stolen, my dog run over,
my credit trashed

but I love my new friend
she is pretty and sweet
she makes me happy
like water flushed with
melting snow

everyone tells me it's true
but I believe it anyway

8 The Beagles of Arkansas, 1978

* The first poem I wrote mentioning Rachel, my bride (now) of 35 years.

Empty Jug ⁹ *

The man said each day shoots from the pump
cold and fast and raw.
How I waited, he said, the old cat
blinking on his chest.
And now it comes like nothing I know.
It was never just you in your dresses
and shoes I waited for those years,
but more of you, more, and more.
I was slipping into a dream of amber,
or was it honey? There,
white nipple of the moon.

9 The Movie Under the Blindfold (1978)

* One of a series of Li Po poems. I was using the mask of the Chinese poet to come to thoughts I was too young and too inexperienced to know on my own. But it was only a “mask” – because I was so young.

Your Human Being ¹⁰ *

Do we know what our gifts are before we give them?

Closer than we ever dreamed,
the way the members of this family
pass through one another
wordlessly, where there
is a bowlful of something
especially for you.

Let's not ever say plural again,
let's not speak in our waking lives again.
If we can't be friends let's be lovers.
We have no time for impatience.

Keep time the way you keep
everything else,
temporarily.
For your two hands are only seeds of miraculous songs,
interrupted by silences,
unfolding at the edge of what you are.

10 The Movie Under the Blindfold (1978)

* I love this poem. It is one of my three or four favorites. It was special to me because it marked a stepping away from "evil eye" poetry, on which I cut my teeth as a young fellow. I may be stealing from Rilke – but what a guy to steal from.

A Compact ¹¹ *

what came down came down
on golden rungs
strapped to the air
with golden thongs

I saw and still see golden men
so taken in this quiver
so balanced in the air

what goes goes to
the end of my heart
the place I keep swept
and warm for you
will always be yours

I apologize for apologies
what missed the mark
well there it was

anxiety does its little dance
the fluttering feet the severed cord
whatever rises does

11 The Movie Under the Blindfold (1978)

* This poem is a steal of the style of W. S. Merwin, whom I saw as a good poet to steal from in 1977.

The Important Thing ¹² *

The hand inside my ribs is done tickling me, good.
Lately it's taken to tapping out rhythm on bones.
"When will I see you again?" "You won't."

It's the hottest day of my life, and the brightest.
In a higher country somewhere else
the kites are at it again, swooping
over meadows and hills.
Its children never scrape themselves.
Miles from a mother, they never need bandages.

Here my mailbox is fuller than I wish.
"It's over. Repeat. It's over. It's over."
I read on. "Now it's time to be happy. Be happy."

The call comes late at night, you descend,
one hand on the banister.
Go ahead, I tell you, tug at your clothes.
Your mother is gibbering herself all away,
the generations wash together when she talks.
Don't worry, you say, she can live for years like this.

The beer sits still in my stomach.
The hand inside starts tightening.
It shivers to a clench.

12 The Movie Under the Blindfold (1978)

* Many of the poems in my first two books, *Lucky You* and *Movie under the Blindfold*, cite some hideous unnamed event, which either had happened or had not yet happened. I was "sneaking up," emotionally, on dealing with the death of my sister Kathleen when she was 15, and I was 11. I knew it was a devastating thing, but I was unable to deal with it, as a young man, on a naturalistic basis. It was too awful, so I hid behind a horror-story voice.

The Heart Sings a Song about Blood ¹³

What you thought was the world
was a bad-tempered angel perched
on your shoulders. No wonder you strove.
Always in the fist of your fight was your stiff
determination.

The murder of prince after prince
bloodied all your jokes. At least you laughed.
Always you kept apart a single step
from the string of succession.

Who succeeds, you said, exceeds in joy
the victorious jay.
Who makes, you said, his bed with iron sheets
will also do.

For when they scatter through the wind
on the heels of the wind,
the shouts they make are wind on metal,
bombs of thunder.

What you are used to calling memory is just
a racetrack of unimportances.
What you were sure was your heart was only
a breed of song that lived inside you all along,
red bird with one wing.

13 The Movie Under the Blindfold (1978)

We Made Up Our Mind ¹⁴

How it happened nobody knew.
Sometime somewhere
far from the nearest hand or eye
the signal came. Maybe it was a grain
of being that surrendered
to the squeeze, that split in two and
rolled apart like thunder. Maybe
it was the moon advancing
to a place in the sky it has not been
seen in in years. Maybe it was
the decision of one of many leaves
that made their way in the shape
of a seed in the beak of a bird or
a crack in a barrel, crossing deserts
and oceans to scale the face of a final
high hill, a tree at a time, a life
at a time, until a certain branch
in a certain year made a certain leaf
that made up its mind in the
summering breeze to shimmer
and shake, and we saw it.
Whatever it was, what we thought
was our idea was less than that,
a sparrow toppling from its branch
and landing in the gutter, everyone starting
to think it was time for a change
for a while.

The Iliad 15 *

A cavern blasted amid high-standing corn
like the swath of a broadsword
in the prayer-chamber of the house of virgins –
trampled stalks and the crushed green ear,
braid-bearded against the ground, listening
long after the final blow is hurled.

Phantom forces have met on the night-cloaked
food-strewn fields and in their fierce combat
shed blood and laid vegetables to waste.
Their waters turned clay vermilion, their dew
that skidded and sprayed through the night
now glitters in the rosy-fingered dawn.

What German shepherd made watchman by war
and named Ajax after a foaming cleanser
now perks his ears at the scent of raccoon
on potato patrol in his quadrant of corn
and unassisted pads the township road
and accosts the raiding masked intruder?

The din of crash and gnashing fills the plain,
the tears of Ceres and countless nymphs of grain
spatter the sides and gnawed limbs of warriors,
even the light in gin-soaked Yeoman Magruder's
bedroom down by Turtle Lake flicks on
as neighbors near and far attend the clash.

By sun-up only the star-shaped wake remains,
and the trail of scarlet collecting in furrows,
leading through the dazed and shivering maize
to the banks of Jacks Creek's moaning curl,
where face-down in mud and open-bellied
the slack-jaw bandit sips his fill of death.

15 Borrowing from Minneapolis (To Pay St. Paul) (1980)

* I imagined that this description of a cornfield battle between a racoon and a dog belonged on the scale of classical epic poetry. This poem, which had so much ambition, was never published.

Back on Farmer Fagan's wooden porch
stout-hearted Ajax hints and whines,
split-cheeked and eyeless, ruffed collar
drips red and the faithful shepherd bleats
and nudges the screen, honored to share
good news in what moments of glory remain.



Voznesenski & Yevtushenko 16 ·

Two Russian poets visited Minneapolis in the winter of 1973. Yevtushenko arrived with a jetload of Soviet reporters and protocol men, Voznesenski under the cover of night, with less than a day's notice.

A group of Ukrainian dissidents
pamphleted Yevtushenko's appearance
at Macalester Fieldhouse, blasting the poet
for putting a sensitive face on Russian brutality.
Yevtushenko smiled as if to say,
I have nothing to do with this.
He was splendrous in his Wranglers,
and drank from a crystal pitcher of milk.

Suddenly the protesters charged the stage
knocking the poet down and upsetting the dais.
I along with others stood to block the attackers' escape.

Yevtushenko stood on the platform
and blinked away milk.

When word came of Voznesenski's visa,
Northrop Auditorium was cordoned off
so a mere 50 people dotted the 5,000 seats
while, standing like a speck below,
the poet groaned like a swinging pendulum
muttering the grim toll of 'Goya' and other poems
in the only language he knew.

No one understood him, yet all were afraid.

16 Namedroppings (1982)

* I filled a sketchbook called Namedroppings around 1972. It was never published. I include several of those poems here. It seemed off to me that I, a nobody from the Midwest, was running into people of note: Ravi Shankar, Hubert Humphrey, George Steinbrenner, W. H. Auden. I even managed a secondhand sighting for Hitler. It occurred to me that people may not care about me, but maybe they would care about these celebrities if I wrote about them. They weren't!

Afterward they got together at Chester Anderson's
to boast and jostle and drink,
Voznesenski alone with a puzzled frown on his face.
Several beers later, I took to the bathroom,
where Chester's golden retriever lay on a pink poof rug.
I stepped over the dog to pee.
Behind me, Voznesenski crept into the room
And knelt by the dog a foot from my stream
Splashing against the porcelain lip.
He scratched the dogs ears and smiled serapically
His two eyes closed, his face held out,
the dew like communion from God
on his face, as if finally, finally free.

The Heighth of the Drouth ¹⁷

The ice in the
Pitcher spins round

And around.
No rain, no food,

An equation fixed
When the colors of mid-

Winter occur in mid-
Summer. Farmers cite

Crop damage figures
Begetting Armageddon.

Even the fish at
The bottom of what's

Left of the spring-
Fed pond are ap-

Prehensive.

17 The Beagles of Arkansas, 1978

Yes! ¹⁸

Yes it's true I was born full grown
and speaking a language
it took twenty years to forget.

And I had the gift of total recall
remembering ages before me and after.

Each birth a detonation,
each breath a crater in the sky
each pair of lungs a palpitating moth.

Yes the rumors can all be confirmed.
There are no false prophets.
Whoever you doubted you shouldn't have.
Nobody lies.

The holy protest,
'One need not travel wide to find wisdom.'
And philosophers roam the length of their attics.
I say, 'Stick to your solemnity
but the world flips by like a roll of bills
at the ear of God.'

True, all true, the claims of assassins,
the letters of suicides, even
the innocent bystander's excuse.

Now bite into bread and see even further.
The steam off the ocean,
the Bedouin's fish,
the fly by your ear,
the ear of that fly.

Friends tell me I've lost my grip
and I say Yes
and rise into space.

18 The Movie Under the Blindfold (1978)

Friends tell me I'm seeing things.
I say Yes!



Last Year's Xmas Dance ¹⁹

Norwegian farmers in hospitals, islands
Of plastic tubes and fluttering eyelids
Struggle to do what they will not do,
Arise and return to their fields.

Ivor Thorsen of Glendive, Montana,
Disintegrating nerves flown in, is awed
By his speechlessness, motionlessness,
Dreams he is laughing in Glendive, Montana.

But the strings inside are all undone,
Incomprehensible to a scarecrow who
Has walked ten thousand furrowed
Crumbled lopsided miles.

Mary, Anna, is it really Christmas Day?
And is it really clumsy me slipping here
With farmer feet on the Legion floor?
Oh look at me Mother I'm dancing.

19 Water Hills, 1982

Rude Country

The laws are different here
and take some getting used to;
don't expect Virgil to take you by the hand.

It isn't inhospitality
but an intuition that is law.
People want to help you but they can't.

Later on it all becomes clear,
and you slap yourself
and say of course.

Time's too short,
who can keep track of all
the things unsaid or done.

'I'm sorry' would confuse –
'You're welcome' won't be missed.
O Lover, shut up and be kissed.

Landlord ²⁰

Mr Hoveland, no more stories
of driving the snowblind expressways
in the dead of night to buy fuses.

You are too brave, too dedicated,
too intelligent – our luck
to dwell in your universe.

But tenants need peace from
so much caretaking, they need
time to not be helped.

That rasping sound just now,
did someone skate
on the "Lark Ascending" CD?

No, it's just Mr Hoveland,
shoveling an eighth-inch
of snow from the walk.

20 Borrowing from Minneapolis (To Pay St. Paul) (1980)

Rachel the Student ²¹

In the lab there was a cat.
Its head was shaved bare,
and sticking out of a wad of putty
was a wire.
When the cat saw Rachel come in, it jumped.
But it didn't land on all fours,
as most cats do.
It hit a cabinet drawer and fell on its side.
And Rachel wants to know what good is a cat
like that.

Every day she bikes by the cancer hospital,
chain grease blackening her pant legs.
Today she looked and a face in a window
was looking out at her,
then pulled the drapes shut.

A big exam is on the way
and she's missed her period
and her neighbor upstairs plays the saxophone
late at night,
and nothing she says makes any difference.
I don't understand it,
she starts crying one day,
why do people want to be mothers.

21 Borrowing from Minneapolis (To Pay St. Paul) (1980)

The Audience

Sometimes I played out in back of the meat mart,
hoping maybe the Polanskys would see me,
let me into the pool,
let me ride the horses,
or let me watch Steve's go-kart.

One day I opened a drum by the rendering plant.
Inside were the eyes of a hundred head of cattle,
some looking this way,
some looking that,
and that, and that, and that, and that,
each one the size of my fist.

Today Steve Polansky still works at the meat mart.
He and his brothers run it now,
hauling the sides of animals on hooks
up and down the sawdust floors.

With me it was different.
I am an actress,
and I live for my audience.

Live at The Astor Pavilion ²²

Up on the roof you hear the pitter patter
of tiny sandwiches.

In the basement the friends you keep have broken out,
they are heading for the salt.

Outside your window a policeman is caressing his gun.
Before things go too far he will arrest himself.

You lie in bed.

You can't feel a thing below your waist.

Your legs who know you for what you are
have chucked you
and raced down the street
to the auditions.

Your arms packed a lunch.

Your genitalia wish them good luck.

Your ears waved goodbye, wraithlike, when they left.

Deep in the shaft in your head
there is an abandoned vein.

You follow it on foot for a hundred yards or so.

At the end of the final corridor

you see a wire stretched taut
from wall to wall,
with a unicycle in the crow's nest.

You remember a line:

'Love leaves you and you must go on.'

Behind, the curtain rises.

22 Lucky You (1976)

The Nymph on The Como Sedan ²³

She wanted a shadow as much as a friend
yet she yanked drunkenly the thing on her leash.
Elegantly tired of the usual faces,
she had the jigs to snag men by the eyes.
Clamping and toothless all soon surrendered;
what powers they had deflated on the sand.
Hers was an extraordinary success,
supplicating knees drew near to her
in a prayer of perfect peristalsis.
Her skin was a map charting decades and distances
broader than the thoroughfares of light
she delighted in. What she wanted
was a pavement of the crushed bones
of lovers, and the worry was
that somehow all the things that she wanted,
as costly as as the perfume of teardrops
she'd extracted, she would get.

23 Lucky You (1976)

Antic Hey²⁴

en route to our rendezvous
I am handed a lit stick of dynamite
and being polite
I do not refuse

blackfaced and with smoldering collar
I proceed,
failing to notice
the two-ton safe
dropping from a fifth story window

though accordioned
I make my way to you
despite doors
opening in my face
that flatten it considerably

too many incidents to recount them all
the locomotive rushing
from the hastily painted tunnel
me poised for what seems like ages
over the manhole hole
before falling

the wet cement awaiting me
soon hardened but
do not despair love

I am coming

24 The Beagles of Arkansas, 1978

A Senator Concedes ²⁵

Written in 1975, titled 'A Politician Retires,' but resuscitated by Al Franken's 2010 victory over Norm Coleman

Every day a man rises and sets off to undo it,
some failure he barely remembers,
a phantom moment hiding in time.

These are the years he is in his prime,
his wisdom and courage fixed in the grin
he landscapes his life with:

the disappointment he feels in the world
he holds at arm's length, the odd fascination
for his mother's first name.

Somehow we never quite let it sink in
that the contests that mattered
have long since been over.

Today I want to walk home, stumbling,
my fists at my eyes,
sobbing all the way.

25 Borrowing from Minneapolis (To Pay St. Paul) (1980)

A Short Song to the Stars

on a night of anger and angry streets
knotted like a stone
pressed to the wound

the children are spinning
their houses in hoops
to the sea

the streets are full with
children they cling
to the spine

like a precious jewel like
a breadcrumb caked
to the trembling chin

knotted like a short song of children
or jewels spinning above like
a song to the moon

Something Not Heard Until Spoken ²⁶

the world is worn away by wheels
speeding past tomcats
bitter as usual about the poor

choice of scraps

the street is gone, the road is gone
every goatherd's path is gone
and their lines reconciled

and their councils sent home

leave this place with unmeasurable step
and shooshingly
understanding is the uncle of silence

that syllable lives forever in your ear

26 The Movie Under the Blindfold (1978)

The Beagles of Arkansas ²⁷

The thin coats twitch,
the unnecessary crash
through the bramble
at night resounds
in the scraggly hills,
and well in the wake of
every foreign license plate
a yapping head and tumult
of eyes plead
adoption.

Scorpions crane their tails
to you, peacocks explode
for passing cars, mud daubers
chew hasty cabins
on rear-view mirrors.

Everything seems to want out,
yet it stays, captives
of the minimum
wage.

27 The Beagles of Arkansas (1978)

Dog in the Manger ²⁸

Hard years after I first hear
the expression
I understand its meaning:
The dog is in the manger,
Napping in the hay.
When cow comes near to eat,

Sharp teeth warn her away.
But you know dogs, sooner
Or later they always repent.
Watch one as he trots out
To pasture, drops a shank-
Bone at your hooves.

28 Borrowing from Minneapolis (To Pay St. Paul) (1980)

Browsers ²⁹

He flipped through the magazines
in the periodical room.

The Cadillac, he thought to
himself, is definitely the
Rolls-Royce of automobiles.

She sauntered through the stacks,
fingers dusting the tops of rows.
The things I don't know,
she pondered, could fill a book.

They stood in line at the
check-out desk,
shifting their weight
like two ships passing in broad
daylight.

The Dance of the Dog 30

The knees bend like spurs
Spun round from the
Rattling steps, shake off
The wood-stove fever
Stored from the
Floorboards through the
Night, race past the pump
To the edge of the
Cleanshorn field where
Only the day before an
Army of corn held sway.
Now on tiptoe, now
Trotting gingerly row to
Row, the pink tongue
Flagging, the keen eye
Swerves to the suggestion
Of movement, surveys the
Swath of harvest slack-
Jawed. The creatures of
The plain are dazed in a
Changed world, but he who
Sleeps on a burlap sack
Where the cinders spit is
Proud to the tooth: I am
I, he thinks, dog, and
This is my country, and
This the might of my
Accomplices.

Anton's Syndrome ³¹

Anton's Syndrome is an actual medical condition, in which the patient denies that he is completely blind.

The spotlights shine on the skaters at night –
the spiraling ease,
the thumbprint's rim –
and we dream of the light that only we can see.

What was the use of doing things and saying things
when all along
the eyes went where they wanted to.
We called our veers and bumps decisions
but they were less than that –
we thought we saw our house on fire,
and far below the safety net, spinning.

We said, we see, we see.

It doesn't work,
it isn't up to us,
some language says it
better than ours –
it goes.

Our watching builds walls,
our yardsticks mete out measure.
Pray for the world
and the insects and birds.

The magical abacus turns,
we visit the field
we thought we knew,
the familiar disc
on the familiar plow.

Certain gases contrive with stones,
and the waters we cling to

31 The Movie Under the Blindfold (1978)

continue their long
conversation with mountain
and forest and
tree.



Perspective ³²

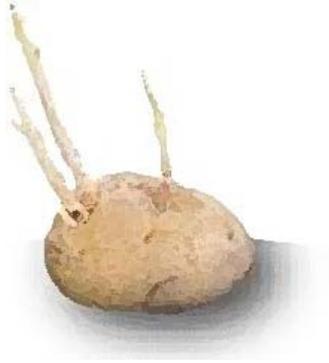
There are no fields
Between the plane
And the ground below.
The farmlands look like
Bandaids, and the little car
On the long skinny highway
Down there looks
Foolproof as a bead
On an abacus wire,
Undeviating
As a button on a thread.

Actually, someone
Full-sized is inside,
And he has to steer
Or he'll go in the ditch.
He could hit his head.
Or worse, miss
His appointment
In a room in one of
The buildings along-
Side the road.

32 Home Trees (1978)

My Poor Fish 33

Can't go to Coon Rapids.
I can go to Coon Rapids
whenever I want –
weekends or after work.



33 Borrowing from Minneapolis (To Pay St. Paul) (1980)

This Poem Is a Public Service ³⁴

*homage to d a levy**

Listen when I talk you little nothings
Little zinc-heads in the cupboards
By the rattling plates
And the nutpicks and the mallets
And the napkins and the forks –
When it comes it will come
As a surprise.

Inconspicuously they are laying tracks
Up every porch of every home in this city.
Into each room and every squeamish store.
Through the backdoors of slaughterhouses
Where sides of nothings, rubber carpets
Hang on hooks
Circling the sour and bloodstained floors
Like pedestrians.

Stop doing what you're doing.
Stop tapping your feet.
Stop asking can you be excused.
And what are you going to do about it,
For your lusterless bodies?
And your partners? And the children?

By now you have noticed no one signs on
For the detail of love anymore.
They say get yourself another stooge.
Let this one have the dirty job. Am I
Your slave?

34 Lucky You (1976) Original title: 'This Poem Is a Public Service'

* d a levy was the Allen Ginsberg/Bob Dylan of 1960s Cleveland, where I grew up. He was sour, revolutionary, irreverent and hilarious. A judge trying him for vagrancy asked him how much he earned as a poet. 'About forty cents a day,' levy replied. 'You should charge more, the judge said. levy took his own life in 1969. I never met him, but I am grateful for his feisty leadership. To me he was a teacher, and kind of beautiful.

It was called cooperation.

At the depot boxes and boxes of kits of lives
Pile up on the loading dock
Squealing for hands.
You can't count on the help
To lift a single finger.
We expect a little something
A special extra some kind of bonus
For his type operation.
You're better off dead
The rich get richer.

At night freight trains cross state lines
So no one can see the lines of giant zeroes
On their backs, three to a flat.
Each one weighs tons and enemy agents
Are snapping them up,
They think they're our replacements.

The other tracks they let decay
Like rows of teeth a thousand miles long.
The enamel starts to chip, the sugar
Does its work.
Between the lean and rotting ties
Grown dogs howl
Like flapping cloth.

You blind little ninnies cry for sweets.
You ten ton babies kick at your baskets.
You've outgrown your usefulness,
Why don't you go home?
Who can take care of you in times like these?
Who can put up with the things that you do?
If you knew a trade –
If you worked with your hands –
There must be someplace else?

Monday they stuffed my secretary in the outgoing file.

Followed by a cut in pay.
Thursday my office turned up missing.
I miss my memoranda.
Now they're asking for my shoes back.
It has just been announced, we have
Run out of weekends.

I am lifted on a stretcher and carried
Out of court.
A paper airplane where my eye should be.
I had taken my complain to the top of the top.
For a judge he struck me as immature.

Plain and simply we caught up too far too fast.
Now no one is safe in his own suit of clothes.
No one is secure for a second.
The machines have started to nag
They say Well
We bitches are hard to satisfy.

What we have in mind is a generation
Of animals.

Desperate losers mechanical slapstick
You dumb seamsters you have snipped
Your antennae.
What happened to your sense of humor?
You've been trapped for days
Between floors on an escalator.
Think. Everything
You see you make gauze.

Businessmen walk the streets
Wet with expressions of loss.
They stop and speak with everyone they see.
Where are all the buildings,
They want to know.
There used to be buildings.
Hold my hand, I couldn't bear

To jump from a tree.
Good sir can you direct me
To the nearest revolution?

Listen you dumb nothings brown nettles
Red gristle dumb people.
The housewives in our city are
Grinding their arms into sausage.
All our shops are boarded up.
Newspapers lick our streets and broken glass
Makes pretty sparkles.
The president has taken to wearing his shirts backwards,
He's taken to giggling.
You can beat this thing, he says,
And explodes.

What nonsense, this town
Is crawling with reptiles and pimps
And you know it.
Each one of them busies himself through the night
Plotting your underground surprise.
Your luggage was sent on ahead.
A list of patrons is circulating,
People you spoke with only this morning
Have signed up for double
Triple hitches.

At night mechanics rub burnt cork on their cheeks
And drum till dawn on the hoods of junked autos
With hammers and socket wrenches.
Children all around the world have
Stopped falling down. Their nails are clean.
They've stopped hurting themselves
And stopped needing you.
In your company they have started
Crossing their legs.

If you hadn't realized
If this comes as a shock

If you didn't know by now
Things are coming to a head.
The lonely beast you keep in the cellar
That wails and wails
Only last night pulled all the red pins from his map.
All your lovers have written your name
A dozen times and torn it up again.
Every stone in every field takes careful aim
And flies. Things are getting
Sticky everywhere.

What can you do, you want to know,
To help yourself through this difficult transition.
How to defend yourself or explain yourself
When what has been heading your way all your life
Arrives with its vengeance.
Are you prepared, the trains are pulling out
Everywhere, bound for unknown destinations.
Fuses are lighting in every bedroom.
There has not been a successful suicide
In weeks, and you sit
Playing with your hands in your lap.

What is it oh what is it, oh,
The name of the song, our song
That's been stuck in your head like a rusty needle
For what seems like years.
Are you coming? Are you going?
You pitiful people you
Tiny nothings your fractured lives
You can't rise up from, can't speak out of,
Can't pierce the membrane that you
Call home, can't break
The quiet that's killing all that you love.

This poem is a public service.
When it speaks to you
Listen.

Accident ³⁵

This coffee cup broken on the floor
will never be whole again.
Such a small thing,
still all this pain.
How can I make it right?

Before I met you I
was hollow, too,
and every little tap
resounded for hours.

Now see how easy I shrug off
disaster. You are
my coffee. I stir,
I cool you with my breath.

35 Home Trees (1978)

Home Opener 36

Cold beer bare skin hot
Sun and this, self perched
On a porcelain rim,
Prying skin,
Laying open the white
Underneath.

This is what snakes do
Every year,
Spiraling outward into time;
Trees, too,
whittling backwards
The bracelets of their lives.

Compulsion, moist hunger and
Strange delight in
Lifting away these
sticky sheets,
Funny feeling called getting
Closer.

36 Borrowing from Minneapolis (To Pay St. Paul) (1980)

The Spot 37 *

after Miguel Hernandez

Stars, ignore the crimes occurring
like catfights under the windows.

Sometimes we're ashamed
of what goes on in the alley,
the things we overturn
and track into the house.
If we were cats we'd know
when to move on.

The pastures of glass we pretend to forget
are always browsing at our heels.
The beauty of most men's universe
is a spot of oil on a rainy street.

Sun and moon, leave off
your pretensions.
If you're so wise, why waste time
on our shadows?

All of us humans scratch at the screen.
We want what is ours.
You look down, the moon looks down,
everything looks down these days.

All of us claim what
we spot at our feet.

37 The Movie Under the Blindfold (1978)

* I was commissioned to translate a book of Spanish poet Hernandez' poems, 'El Rayo Que No Cesa.' The book was surrealistic so it was difficult, with my schoolboy Spanish, to be certain what the poet meant. The translation was refused. But I loved the shepherd poet who died fighting Franco and the Nazis. This is my Hernandez-like homage.

At the Ball Park ³⁸

Ball Day at the ball park
and before the game
Lyman Bostock throws
out a couple dozen balls,
and all us fans
stand on our seats and
reach for them.

When Carew's turn comes
everyone cheers, even
the kids stop scouting
for ice cream in
a cup for a minute.

And when the vendor
does come by he stands
in everyone's view, so
we watch him instead,
pouring two bottles
of beer at a time, holding
his dollars in his teeth.

38 Home Trees (1978)

Look What the Sun Has Lit Up ³⁹ *

A black silk stocking a mile long and full of holes.
It has the look, it has the feel of the most
expensive fabric.
See how it works, its lens distills all color
into light,
its patterns clear as salt, its frequencies wash
against our shore like waves
of rings on dark fields.

Inside our hearts there are other hearts,
strings of motion sewn into cinematography,
threads of voices pressed
onto blue rectangles.

It's the medicine dropper's quivering eye,
it's the sensation of lubricants passing between us
and over us and through us
like battalions of roses.

Our hearts pass by one another on pulleys,
You can see them on silver conveyor belts
drawing near their destinations.

39 The Movie Under the Blindfold (1978)

* At some point in 1977 I switched from being a young guy bursting with doomlike negativity to the exact opposite – a surrealistic romantic. This poem and several like it, deriving from a book of Italian futurists I was reading, bear witness to this peculiar change. I don;t think it was false – I have both of these impulses in me, and they each get me in trouble with devotees of the other feeling. And its not like I had a choice.

The Man in the Air 40 *

The man in the air has been falling since Thursday.
He has an appointment on Sunday, at noon.

Time is important – he has always been punctual.
He checks his watch for the seventh time today.
In his mind he goes over the names of the clients
ahead of him,
the names of their families, the memory
of the perfect handshake.
My business is people, he says in the air.
I'm not just selling pieces of paper,
I am selling satisfaction,
I am selling myself.

He is almost sure how to do it this time.
A terrific idea will come to him soon;
until then, Pleasant day,
unlike Friday, falling all afternoon and during the best hours
of the early evening through light rain.

He holds out his hand in the rush of air.
Warmer now, almost perfect, he thinks.
Already I am having presentiments of success.

The man in the air is turning and twisting,
the cloth of his trousers is flapping around him.
He is falling head first,
he is sure he will get
where he's traveling soon, falling upward
like a stone.

40 The Movie Under the Blindfold (1978)

* I wrote four of these "Man in the ..." poems for Movie under the Blindfold – one for air, water, fire, and earth. They are all dream satires. Be grateful I did not include them all.

The Lost Colony ⁴¹ *

All we wanted was to set up shop, sell what we found,
then have our sons and daughters take our places
later on.

After the first year we piled everything up on the beach
and waited for the ships, but the ships didn't come.
We had to eat our own food.
We didn't make a cent.

The next year was the same, and the year after that.
The piles got smaller, though, and after a time only the
young went on about sailboats
and flags.

We trade among ourselves but it isn't the same.
We can't all get rich off each other.

We knew something went wrong but we didn't know what.
Some new kind of war where everyone died
or a new kind of storm that put out every fire.
We thought of barricades, epidemics, even the possibility
that no one remembered.
How did we get so alone in the world?

The torches we lit with the remaining oil
laughed through the night and went out.
We started to keep to ourselves in the fields.
The work week grew shorter.
We didn't talk as much over meals.
One by one, a few of us stopped showing up
at the market, for meetings, to eat.

On the night of the last meeting we cast our final ballots.
Breaking camp, we buried the pitchforks and rifles.

41 The Movie Under the Blindfold (1978)

* Based on the true history of the Roanoke Island settlement – second English colony in Virginia, after Jamestown. One day everyone just left, without explanation. It could have been famine, starvation, hostile indigenes. I like to think this is just what America does – it swallows us up with its ability to lose us.

We burned our houses and put out the fires.
This occurred in the spring of the last year we kept
track of.

We tore up the book of debts and allowances, one page
at a time.

Dividing into groups of two and three, we headed inland,
leaving not so much behind as a single naked
footprint in the sand.

Who? ⁴²

One of us quit, we don't know which.
But something packed up and left, leaving
 little behind.

One of us remained; we don't know who.

There are two blind sides to every corner,
 yet we slip notes in both directions.
Nearer than two kissing faces, between the
 cracks of worn ideas and remembered dreams;
 under the snow that dropped in a heap
 and killed everything green around us
 and in us; we know one thing:

One of us is dying, no one knows who.
Someone is going, we don't know where.
But we are busy like bees in our cells now,
 filling full the vacancy.

42 The Movie Under the Blindfold (1978)

The Important Thing 43 *

The hand inside my ribs is done tickling me, good.
Lately it's taken to tapping out rhythm on bones.
"When will I see you again?" "You won't."

It's the hottest day of my life, and the brightest.
In a higher country somewhere else
the kites are at it again, swooping
over meadows and hills.
Its children never scrape themselves.
Miles from a mother, they never need bandages.

Here my mailbox is fuller than I wish.
"It's over. Repeat. It's over. It's over."
I read on. "Now it's time to be happy. Be happy."

The call comes late at night, you descend,
one hand on the banister.
Go ahead, I tell you, tug at your clothes.
Your mother is gibbering herself all away,
the generations wash together when she talks.
Don't worry, you say, she can live for years like this.

The beer sits still in my stomach.
The hand inside starts tightening.
It shivers to a clench.

43 The Movie Under the Blindfold (1978)

* I had a hard time deciding whether to include this poem. It typifies what I was about in 1977 – writing horror-dreams about something happening, something unclear. I felt I was morphing into the Stephen King of free verse, hung up on darkness. On the plus side, I believe I was experiencing something darkly prophetic. When the by who cries wolf really sees wolves, what is he to do? And, I like the writing, which strikes me as icy and unrelenting.

It's Over ⁴⁴ *

This is the end of everything so far.
Here is the beginning of everything else.
Two days ago we were in love like fire.
Now we are worrying again.

This is the end of all up to now,
This is the start all whatever is left.
The end and beginning of life on earth.

We take turns drawing the dotted line between us
Like a long fuse, and our life together
Spits like the wayward snake.

Sometimes I want to let it go,
Twist lid,
Watch it shoot from the can.

I want to see if the fire we feed
Would go out by itself,
Or if we'd panic
And reach for wood.

44 The Movie Under the Blindfold (1978)

* I was a young guy, studying the relationships I was in. In this one, I knew it was not going anywhere. But I was passive and unable to break it off myself. Eventually, though, I did. No 60s philosophy strikes me as quite as putrid as 'Love the one you're with.' Better to get to work and find the one you are supposed to be with.

Letter From Como 45 *

Taking course to ospreys and antlions and the mauve noodle
stacked like rosaries in the outer office
Tonight it is quiet it is too quiet tonight
Taking course from the trail of rags and broken webbing
and the natives trembling under the giant banah leaves
And taking course dead reckoning from the moon
directly chuckling like the Old Bombardier
Take my course to the sailor awash and aflat
on the tarot deck
Take it to Queens and Pawtuxet and the all-nite laundromat
It steams like desire in the sleeping pile of woolens
And the natives pressed themselves thin as knives
pressed against the quivering chandelier
take it to Mom and Pop and the aging cheerleader
who ten years later still presses the torn photograph
against her ribs
It is too quiet it is sinister
It is number than any number
And what do I do oh what please say
is a pawpaw and a bobtail nag all the doodah day
Take it to America America in the springtime springtime in
America
because this is the garden of animal delight
the clean scrape of the dish on cement
Taking course to red jackals and jaydaws and the red noodle
Nailed to the waiting room like old magazines
It is better than that it is steadier than that
How do you do and welcome to Fabricburg
You can't tell the fours from the threes
You can't tell the flowers from the screams
No wonder they say we were made out of mud
Come out of your trees and your rivers and

45 Lucky You (1976)

* This is just a crazy dream. I used to go to Como Zoo a lot. It was free, and they let you take your dog in. Somehow everything twirled in a bucket one eve ning, and this is what I came up with. I felt at times that surrealism, which is silly on the surface, teaches you to surface emotions that "meaningful" sentences would ted to suppress. I'm grateful I went through this phase as it allowed me to figure out a voice, without having to have anything (much) to say.

Come to America come to Minnesota
Come to the click of cleats and the children
straddling the giant tortoise they have come
They have come for miles around
Come to the land of long letters of love the land of love
This is the land of the crackling barn
and the land of the infernal flower
and the land of big shovels
This is the home town this the sublime
This is the black underside of a million raw tabletops
Love scarred like burnt pleasure and bubblegum
These are its children and those are its heights
These are the fingers meshed and twined like cotton candy
Peanut shucks and gosh the divine criminentlies
Come to the straw and the cane and urine flowing like soda
Come to the land of poultry and the love of the condom
Come to the rinsed kidneys of the lost tribes
And the land of small children and dogs
They teem in the refuse like ambassadors for change
Come to the Como when the hibiscus are in bloom
and the drunks are in bloom and the tree sloths
Parasites bloom green in the skin
Come to the green swarming pond this year
we dredge there our memories
of kindness and jewels and breadloaves
and cannonshot rakes and quicksilver
Come when the tuna are jumping
and the children are jumping at cornbread and promises and time
and the secrets of time This spring
the tiger is muttering remonstrances of love
And the banker noodle sits like a patient in the vestibule
Come to the 24-hour urgent care centers cursing
the revolving doors and the No Parking Zones
and the decisive victory in the field
Come to the spreading joy of a thousand elm trees
Two years from blight and the skinny roots of love
And the thousand children jumping in the night
Taken in dreams to a place beyond mountains
and the thousand mattresses no one turns over any more

Come to Como Brother John and Alphaea
Take to the hard streets and the harder walls
And take course to the parklights bathing the lost kids
And take course down the trillion rows of lilies and rot
take course to Como at a certain time of year
now here now gone forever now at the tip
of every tongue take course
by hunted animals strung by ropes
their bodies opened to the wind and to love
Flies singing seafaring stories in the breeze
Open and battered to the slim
curve of love

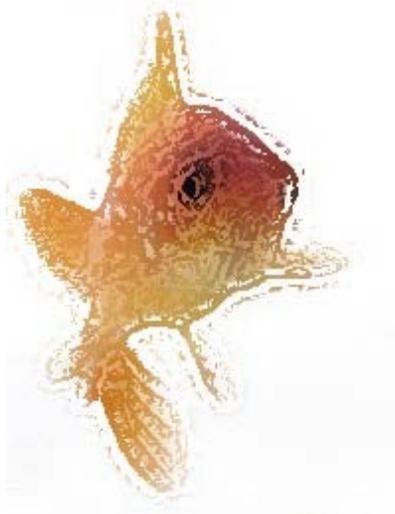
Good! 46 *

fish in the fishtank

bread in the bag

me waking up on the studio couch

the system is working



46 Borrowing from Minneapolis (To Pay St. Paul) (1980)

* Everything is working the way it is supposed to, is the message here – no matter how unsatisfactory it feels.

Pandit 47 *

The vocational counselor in Delhi
Apologized for giving bad advice:
'Not every young Brahmin with money
Is wise.' Many years later,
Pandit's swami, glancing about his
Townhouse in St. Anthony Falls,
Shook his head. 'Pandit-ji, ' he
Said, 'your instincts are bad
Enough, but your lifestyle has got
To go.' Every guru starts
Somewhere, and for Pandit the
Crossing occurred one evening in
1973. He had chanted a special
Intention for two nights and a day,
And now his skin began to evanesce
And a glow like radium suffused his
Features and the bones of his hands
And feet shone in the rice-paper
Silhouette like moonlit twigs.
Suddenly Swami barges in, unplugs
The lava-lamp and shakes Pandit by
The shoulders. 'Wake up, Balbir,
You disgrace to your caste. When
Will you quit all this fidgeting? '
Four years of doctrine and
Contemplation and Swami Mukhtaranda
Throws up his hands. 'Tell me, have
You considered a career in
Dentistry? People get toothaches,
You could be useful. We have been
Discussing your case at Himalayan
Central in the Loop. Pandit-ji,
It's not working out.' Pandit
Breaks down on the other end. 'But

47 Borrowing from Minneapolis (To Pay St. Paul) (1980)

* I studied yoga meditation one spring in 1977. My teacher was a lovely man named Usharbudh Arya.

What of my chapel, with the acoustic
Paneling and foam carpet pads –
What of the rent, the three skinny
Daughters, Irish setter, Triumph
Roadster? Give me another chance,
Business will boom.' Swami relents:
'Just thank God you're in
Minneapolis where you can't hurt
Anyone.' Pandit attends continuing
Education courses in business
Management at the university
Convention center, learns the seven
Words to seal a sale, prints
Meditation coupons in the back pages
Of the Sunday TV section. Hatha
Enrollments begin to swell, a course
In breathing for data processors
Draws overflow crowds, registered
Nurses from around the city salute
The sun from every angle. Suburban
Gardeners no longer worry about
Scaly-worm and red-ear mites. Swami
Writes: 'I am man enough to admit I
Was wrong. You're some kind of
Pandit. Christmas is out, we're
Booked at Vail six months in
Advance.' Pandit spawns a yogi
Tummy, bolstered by his taste for
Hostess Snowballs. The wisdom of
The East is born again, Midwestern.
'Shift gears with your one mind,
Retain the other for the clutch.'
He hires so many assistant pandits
He doesn't know which one smokes
Luckies and lectures on the holy
Wind within. His checkbook is
Bulging, his checks in the popular
Scenic Wilderness design, the
Rockies, Mojave, Maine lighthouse

And drive-thru Sequoia. But Sunday
Mornings while the Christians pray,
Pandit snaps on snorkel and weighted
Boots, and drifts the tangled floor
Of Lake Calhoun. 'On surface, ' he
Tells his class on scuba yoga, 'we
Encounter the brunt of life's
Agitations, those waves and splashes
Which torment the honest heart. But
When we go below we feel this
Unlikely thing, the tranquil wet
Embrace.' He pads through the mud,
Brushes long ropes of alga aside. I
Am I, he inhales, Thou art Thou, he
Exhales, and here in this constant
Kiss of life is the successful
Career of one soldier of Shiva in
These United States.

In the Corner Panel of the Saints Constantina and Ann ⁴⁸ *

The first thing that always goes out are the lights.
Smothered by bells, they cry out, then go out.
The next things that go are the sleepers.

Look at the woman who dreamed of white lights
while the town she grew up in
is burning behind her.
Crazy, she knows she is in the wrong picture,
using up space,
in the way.

Why did it happen?
Who lit the fire?
The whole town collapses
like a scorpion dancing,
then touching its tail to its lips.

The moon is delighted, is yellow
as pee, steps forward and backward
in the flickering shadows.
The crackling houses bloom into
the flower of fire.

48 Home Trees (1978)

* There is no such triptych. I imagined it, on my sofa in Minneapolis, around 1975.

Li Po Leaps 49 *

July evening trembles in the breeze
the old poet stoops for a hand of white grapes
that are white rooms of summertime
jiggling in the eye

Here is the index
to animal eyes and to two hands anchored
to a yoke that is a collarbone
made brittle and bare by the sun

And I see
a man up to his waist in white current
scooped at and torn as a secret

This
human fruit is wine and never stagnant
it tumbles into gorges like blown silk
pitched into summer and round

49 The Movie Under the Blindfold (1978)

* I have learned since writing this that it is not true, as depicted in poems, that Li Po, drunk on the riverbank, saw the full moon shimmering in the water, and leaped to his death.

This Gun Shoots Black Holes ⁵⁰ ·

'If we can travel indefinitely outward
from a given point, we also travel infinitely
into that point, never reaching center.'

Aris Rutherford

Imagine a bullet that swallows its gun
that sucks up assassins
and targets at will:
the more it absorbs,
the smaller it
gets.

Trees shoot into the bullet, streets tear free
from their beds and jump into it,
thunderheads condense and pour
into the bullet, and the bullet
shrinks down to
the dot of
an eye.

Finally the whole planet is clawing its way
into this particle of dust and the flaps
of the universe come undone and fly
into the thing that is now
so small that everything's
died and gone
into it.

It moves in trillions now. Nonillions now.
Quindecillions. Vigintillions.

And life goes on
under our red roof
with no one the wiser.
I ask for the horseradish.
You pass it my way. And we
look at one another, traveling.

50 Home Trees (1978)

* Many poems have been written about black holes. I have been told this may be the most astrophysically uninformed one.

The Campaign 51

We heard the click when we crossed the threshold.
I entered your body and set up camp.

The infantryman is the backbone of any army.
He knows when to retreat and when to hold the line.

A month, four months, a year.
We're getting used to the bill of fare,

to the figures of speech,
to the customs of your country.

Eventually the soldier hangs up his guns.
I know I do.

Joining with the enemy we build new walls
on the next frontier.

51 The Movie Under the Blindfold (1978)

Ice Flowers ⁵²

for Maureen Smith

It's shameful seeing fields I can't identify.
It's ice, or something,
a tangle that affects me.
I see zinnias and fall flowers with chew-marks
of frost on them,
a white mat of fur that I lay on
and chisel with my nails.

I noticed it first on a window frosted over,
and later a figure on a patch of linoleum,
and later out of a hatch in my eye
where a while ago a painting had been.
There were haystacks and sheep in it,
and the stubble figures of men
caught in the motion
of hoisting something overhead.

I can tell by the quiet it must be winter.
And how it affects me, I want
to write everyone I know,
or have them come visit me.

52 Home Trees (1978)

The Hunt 53 *

You heard sounds in the middle of night downstairs.
The clicking of hammers, drills, tiny saws.
If it was a prowler, why did you get up?
You could have been hurt.
You got up.

Downstairs the small men stare at you and ask,
'Why do you do this to us?
Now we must leave you.'

Afterwards you seemed changed, you said
You'd enlisted in the hunt for love,
Afternoons you set traps for love.

I know what came over you, how you wanted
To take that scene from the start and rewrite it,
You wanted a garden where the spattered bushes were.
But how would you make use
Of the black limb left behind, desperate
For the soothing scratch,
Alive?

53 The Movie Under the Blindfold (1978)

* This is one of the oldest poems in the book, written in a student notebook in 1969. I like the cartoonishness of it, but how the emotion swirls toward the end, like sugar in water.

My Bicycle 54 *

I set aside this perfect day to be with my bicycle.
Beautifully red, she's been mine
for three years.
I have just bought a pair of blue handlegrips.

Now for our free pirouettes in the sun.
There is no joy like this one.
Down a smooth hill
and into the wind, the low sound of whistling
in her spokes – I close my eyes
and trace a shiver down my spine.

Now we rest in the shade of a tree,
and my lovely bicycle, anxious
to please me,
guides herself in small circles.

Here, the figure eight.
Here, quick brakes!
I'm so proud, I applaud,
and my bicycle wheels sheepishly toward me,
sets her handlebar in my lap.

I stroke her saddle,
I murmur kind words.
When she stands before me,
her chain sags irresistibly,
her bearings rattle deep in her hind parts.

I mount her,
and we ride.

54 Home Trees (1978)

* I thought this was daring in 1977 – a romance with a bicycle? Today it just seems sweet.

Parking Lot 55 *

The attendant is angry
His edger is missing,
And in a crack in the blacktop
Near the corner of Eighth & LaSalle,
Five weeds are sticking their heads up,
Looking for trouble.



55 The Movie Under the Blindfold (1978)

* Humor became a primary feature of my writing, and it was apparent from the beginning. But with this 1975 poem, I was finally getting the rhythm of it. I.e., the humor was starting to be a little bit *funny*.

We Asked for a Sign 56 *

Three days he waited to fart.
Then it came, endlessly bubbling,
like a machine gun in honey.
His widow smiled thinly.



56 Lucky You (1976)

* I always thought this was funny, but I have never had anyone confirm this for me. A corpse in a coffin, farting. The widow blanching. Come on, people. Sigh.

In Praise of Granite 57

'My incense rises heavenward to thee'
Inscribed on Thoreau's chimney

The beer cans say they've been at it all summer,
The high school kids, parked on land that isn't their own,
Getting high and sliding their fingers in and out
Of one another's underpants.

Forty-eight years ago three bank robbers took
This quarry road, smashed through that gate,
And planted two sticks of dynamite under the safe
That lies in a heap this fine spring day
Like a four-legged corpse with a horrible wound.

Back in Cambridge, Ray looks at the picture
For the thousandth time, a Chinese print of a dragonfly
Lighting on a bamboo frond; it's almost invisible.

A few blocks away, I'm sitting on a granite curb
In front of an Episcopal abbey.
Someone is behind me, a monk with Japanese eyes.
Do you want to make a meditation, he asks.

In Concord, several kids have fun
Breaking bottles on the one stone left from the shed
On Walden Pond, dense granite it was.

Lying on our backs in the rear of Dirk's pick-up,
Ray and I watch as the wires loop from pole to pole,
The sudden explosions of treetops above us.

Meditation 58

thirty seconds short of a miracle
reminds the world
to keep me on my toes

forget it's a poem it's
life everlasting and what would
you give for life everlasting

I am a cracker breaking into
the crumbs of what I am, fit for a journey
through a thousand carnivorous years

remember me the way you first glimpsed me
through the wrong end of the telescope
that's me in the distance, my hand in yours

shut the door the thing out there
that was us will go away
and let us remember what

a privilege it was to bless this
space that was our duty
to keep busy with being

58 The Movie Under the Blindfold (1978)

Bernal Diaz at Prayer

Before the Battle of Otumba, 1520 ⁵⁹

We sleep in armor again tonight,
Like tipped over beetles.
We roll,
We roll,
And the roaches rattle through our limbs
And joints and iron breastplates.

Holy Spirit I lift lead arms,
My broadsword dangles at the cuff.
Even the dew adds weight to me
And the smoke and ashes
Curl propitiation
To strange gods in volcanoes.

To the true God your select ones pray
To discern the difference between
What is rust,
What blood.

When the hour to clamber upward comes,
Grant safe passage to some good place
To look down on what is ours

59 Meccico (1978)

Sergeant Gallegos Abolishes Higher Rank,

1913 ⁶⁰

The walls I made them run toward
Were the ones they themselves built
To keep me out and my mixed kind.
I swear I could watch these
Lieutenants and colonels drill
Like foot-soldiers forever – but
Lacking time and owing to their
Numbers, dispatch must be efficient.
Those who maintained the ancient order
must benefit first from the new.
The new justice is, they run, I
Shoot them dead, them barefoot through
The cactus spines, me resplendent
In my brocade sedan-chair!
The only peace I will know tonight
Is the balm of the butter
From the old masters' icebox
On my tragically blistered
Trigger finger.

60 Meccico (1978)

Triangles Prisms Cones 61 *

From a distance all we were were
big blue wheels;
we called them 'our reasonableness, '
we called them 'true circles, '
living in the world
and spinning with love.
It was our only course,
like the rudderless boat's,
to see land,
any land.

I was bound in copper coil,
you were a fire of slippery jewels.
From a distance we
were static electricity,
living in love with the stock-still world.

Crying under our floorboards
was our silver pyramid,
penned inside our walls were
ancient bulls
in bas relief.

Our flags were sins on lascivious oceans,
our word for regret was
'a whirlpool of blood, turning in space.'

It sped on.
The dot
which was so small at first
became what it had to become,

61 The Movie Under the Blindfold (1978)

* I took the title from the same Italian Futurist anthology I took 'Where Birds fare Well.'
After the first line, I believe all the words are mine.

a collapse into feeling.
Item broke down into item of light,
each one new and unknown.
It was 'our home,'
a wave of slow motion,
which was all our lives forever.



The Louse 62

Life in the forest where moisture
gleams from every limb
our plaintive harvest fills the air.

I know we aren't friends
and yet we are close.
I mark and deposit

I whisper to the dendrites
my affection for you
No one knows you
the way I do.

I am desperate for your
scratch, see
I hover in your fur.

62 Lucky You (1976)

Where Birds Fare Well 63 *

Swallow on telephone lines,
Doves in the underbrush,
Hawks in ruins and cathedral rafters,
Crows on the shoulders of fallen soldiers,
Peacocks on staircases,

Canaries in the offices of motel managers,
Parrots in rich women's kitchens,
Whip poor wills sobbing
in the branches of trees
on long summer nights.

Sparrows on rooftops, in hedges and haylofts,
Eagles ensconced atop immaculate mountains,
Hérons in marshes,
Swans in canals and
floating in fountains,

Skylarks sing into the sun,
Owls in cemeteries,
And cuckoos in the heads
of young
men.

63 Home Trees (1978)

* This is the poem referred to in a later poem, 'Remainders.' It is a loose translation of a poem I found in 1975 in an anthology of Italian Futurist writers. So in a sense this is stolen – a schoolboy's lift. And it is no longer interesting to me to share credit with some worthy writer from a different era that I barely understood. But doggone it, this is *my* poem. And I'm (at this writing) *alive*. Coincidentally, I became a futurist at this point in my life, lower case *f*. I produced a TV show called *Future Shoes*, which went on to become an important slogan for me.

Home Trees ⁶⁴

My hometown was Amherst, "little town in the woods,"
a quarry town, "Sandstone Center of the World."

When the quarries were young, trees grew high and thin
from their floors.

Twenty years later, the quarries are deep with spring
and rainwater.

What's left of the tree trunks are rotten now.

But the hole continues to fill.

When I was little I walked the lake Erie bluffs,
the bushes came up to my shoulders.

Twenty years later, the bushes are trees, I'm more of a kid
than ever.

When my mom remarried we moved to Vermilion,
"Named for the Red Clay Used by Indians to Make Pots."

My stepfather Dick's dad bought land there,
planted poplar trees alongside the creek bank,
the site of the home Dick would build years later.

The poplar is favored for rapid growth,
grows straight and tall, makes an excellent windbreak,
and in summer its leaves turn upward
and shimmer like dimes.

But they don't live long.

Twenty years later they are all chopped down
and taking their place beside the house is the sweep
of a willow tree's arms.

Dick says the arms are too heavy, may break off
in a thunderstorm, may crash through the roof,
so he's sawing it down in the summer or fall.

Rachel and I made a trip that year to my towns,
and I showed her the house I grew up in.

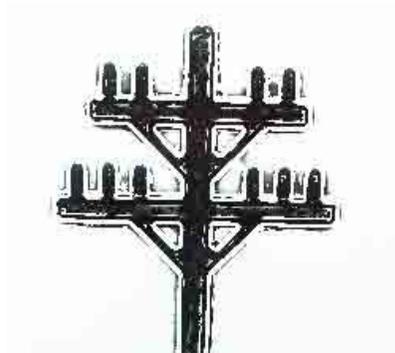
Then there were cherry trees, apples trees, peach trees.

The orchards are gone now, their places taken

64 Home Trees (1978)

by split-level homes
of middle managers at the Ford Plant in Lorain,
"Best Location in the Nation."

And Rachel and I find a place on the bluffs to make love
and nap in the shade of utility poles.



Eliminations ⁶⁵

Finding the line was no problem for the runner.
He might be a brute but he's not at all slow.
This body of mine likes to be running, he thinks.
These muscles like barbells and ropes.
These feet need road to be pushing behind.

"I am in an event," he stopped someone and said.
"Are you ready?" he was asked.
He said "Yes."

He came to a place inside the ring.
All around the microphone roared.
He looked at the clock and he said to himself,
"I am not as afraid as I was."

He had been in the circle before and forgotten.
The same sawdust and spectators and sand.
He knew about the cinder track
and maybe he thought, "Oh God I want to win,"
and his muscles tossed
and the pistol cracked
and he broke.

65 The Movie Under the Blindfold (1978)

Four Lousy Miracles 66 *

Four lousy miracles and you're expected to salute,
Don't believe a single word.
Because every time you begin to believe
Something better's down the road.
Breakfast, lunch, supper, goodnight.
And in the morning, waffles.

Always something new around the corner
like a blinker. That explosion began
with the end of the war, the parts went sailing,
east, south, north, west, up.
Each time I wake I slip into a dream.
Mom, is that you? Oh hi, Rachel.

Time drags the body kicking and screaming
into the foyer, and you have the nerve
to ask What's new?

Let me tell you a story.
A man went for a walk and saw houses and tree trunks
and cars.
But they were *the* houses, *the* cars, and *the* trees.

66 The Movie Under the Blindfold (1978)

* People have never asked me, what do the *the's* mean at the end, but they should have, because they are extremely important. The person in the poem is having a vision, and it is of perfect forms for things, not dull examples from life. You might say this is the psychedelic experience – the sense that things matter terribly – but first we must regard them in a certain respectful way. There is no explaining it – but it is apparent to anyone who ever looks.

The Light ⁶⁷ *

I talked about it and talked about it,
and now I can't look at it.

It was supposed to be visible a long way off.
Outside, but you could take it inside.
Though it came at the end of a long, lousy year,
and many dry miles of traveling,
it would be perfect.

And here it is, of all seasons, summer.
It comes and it's not what I thought it would be.
From the porch of my mom's house in Ohio,
fireflies brightening the dark.

I know how this goes.
In the end I'll congratulating myself, saying:
I knew it.
I knew it
but no one else could see it.

67 The Movie Under the Blindfold (1978)

* this was the concluding poem in The Movie Under the Blindfold. I think it may be the most self-pitying poem ever written. But it still seems true to me.

Fever 68 *

Infant daughter in my arms
plucks absently at my nipple.
A smile forms.

She gets the joke,
how useless I am,
and it seems to do her good.



68 The Brood (1992)

* I found this poem of mine published in a website of mediocre father-daughter poems. That was OK. But they rewrote the last line to "Thank goodness she got better!"

The Art of Negotiation ⁶⁹

We start life
as egomaniacs,
fists full of demands

after that it's one
concession
after another.



69 The Brood (1992)

In Ely ⁷⁰

Along Highway 169 leading into town
Banners strung across storefronts proclaim
'Welcome fishermen! '

As if fishermen just pulling in
Would presume the opposite,
That businesses in a resort town would turn up their noses
At a steady stream of customers,
That there is a stigma attached like hook to lip,
That anglers wear the mark of Cain.

Or they are Rosa Parks with purse in lap
And until this time, until this town,
No fisherman had stood up for himself
And said, 'Shopkeeper, you will take my money,
Because while I perform unspeakable torture
On creatures lower down on the phyla chart
I myself am fashioned in God's image
And deserving of dignity thereof.'

Perhaps it's the smell of death in the cleaning sheds
Emanating in squiggles like heat from the highway
Or the danger of store employees getting snagged
On those hats they wear with the Martian flies,
Neon colored like candy or crayons
But inextricable without needle-nosed pliers

And the grim countenance of the fisher
Who has drawn one closer to his limit.

70 Sunset Lake (1989)

Hitler In The Vestibule ⁷¹ *

The bald old man sat at table spooling his eggs
With a spoon. I don't get it, Thomas,
I told him, you could have been
A famous musician, and
Fiddled in concert halls around the world.
At age eight you were tutored by Sarasate.
And here you are running a southside diner.
Why?

He grinned sheepishly, changed subjects. Did I
Tell you about my confrontation with Hitler?
During the Anschluss of 1939 I was eight, I was
Visiting Vienna for the second time that year.
Meister Drucker had booked us into the Kaiserhof,
And one morning I had nothing to do, so I boarded
The elevator and pushed all the buttons.
Whenever the lift arrived at a floor, I would
Push the button again. The car was an agony of
Slowness.

It was the same hotel where the president had
Agreed to meet Hitler that day, and downstairs
A mob of journalists were queuing in the lobby
With Hitler as he rocked from boot to boot,
Waiting for the elevator to come down.
Diplomats on hand swallowed hard, worrying that
Hitler would perceive the elevator's operation
As an incident of national mischief. When I
Finally landed on the first floor, and the gate
Swung open and I looked up at the black leather
Coat of Herr Hitler, arms folded and a look of
Considerable severity on his quaking features,
I began to cry.

71 NAMEDROPPINGS (1982)

* My interview was with a performance artist named Alan Brookins-Brown, who used to perform the midnight shows at Dudley Riggs Etc. in Minneapolis. I sat with him and Barry Casselman one evening on the West Bank and he told me this remarkable story of the Fuehrer and the elevator in Vienna.

Poor Hitler. He craved, I think, to crush me
Like a roach, it was what he need, what he lived
For, but with the photographers on hand and a
Country to overrun, he was obliged to be on his
Best behavior. So instead he smiled and I thought
He looked much more like Oliver Hardy than
Chaplin with that diagonal smirk, he scooped me
Up in his arms, kissed the tears from my cheeks
And called me German baby names. I remember
How smooth were his cheeks, how high-pitched his
Speech, and the implacable look my first instructor
Wore also.

The rotogravure ran under the headline of
AUSTRIA SURRENDERS across the world. I
Continued to study and to play.
But gradually I came to miss my own childhood,
which had gotten lost in my abilities and my schedule.
I wanted to sit in a sandbox and smash wet
Castles with my planes, wanted plebiscites
And pogroms laying waste to my room. Because
Hitler and I came to see the same thing.
Retreat one time, you never see action
Again.

Little Bighorn ⁷²

I take my boy to the battlefield
we pause in the locust grass
to read a warning sign, 'Beware
of rattlesnakes. Stay on the path!'

My son's little hand in mine
we climb the steady ridge
where the Sioux appeared that day
like feathered cougars in the sun.

I point out the crosses.
'The soldiers fell here, understand?'
'Yes, daddy, they stepped off the path
and the rattlesnakes bit them dead!'

72 The Brood (1992)

Crossing Nobles County on a Clear Day ⁷³

It was not a tornado because it was not attached to anything.
It was a dust devil, a creature of air pressure,
a swirl of turbulence on a warm afternoon
Not giant and dark, but tawny and tan,
the color of dirt being milled into sunlight,
like a thousand-foot feather tickling
the tummy of the earth

73 The Upset Sea (2010)

Dead Cat for Ray ⁷⁴

I entered a barn on an abandoned farm
in the town of Kinbrae where I lived.
In a manger on a bed of old straw I found a cat,
very dead, very thin, no fur, its leather skin stretched taut around
it.
Its back was arched in a defensive posture,
its face pulled wide in a final hiss,
and in its mummified condition you could distinguish
each vertebra and tooth.
I believe it had a heart attack and died defending itself,
perhaps against a German shepherd or raccoon.
The attacker slunk away, leaving the cat a mummy of life and
death.

When my friend Ray came to visit the farm
I took him for a tour of things I had seen –
the grave of Suicide Minnie,
the sandpaper leaf of the lamb's-ear plant,
finally to the manger in the Sveringen barn,
and we stared at the cat like reverent bad boys
then walked home.
That night we lay down in the township road
and watched the aurora shift and split in the northern sky.

Ray was from Cambridge, a city guy, gay, into *est*,
a sculptor, painter, performance artist.
He flew back home the following day,
and I did not hear from him for two years,
when he invited me to read a poem at an exhibit of his.
The art was stupendous, torsos in charcoal, roughcut wood,
hairy ropes, chains.
Ray couldn't draw his way out of a bag,
but he had something else, a ferocious vigor that moved me.
At the heart of the installation he had suspended
on an invisible line
the dead cat from Sveringen's barn, and it turned slowly

74 Sunset Lake (1989)

in the warm air of the gallery,
whiskers stiff, eyes black, teeth bared to the ear.

It was like, the height of bad taste to exhibit a dead creature
as art, and yet everyone who saw was overwhelmed
at the brave agony of the cat.
In a gallery that had seen plenty of bad ideas and wrongheaded
impulses
here was life and death hanging in a haze,
it was more than noteworthy, it was serious.

A part of me resented that Ray had stolen back in the night
and taken my holy treasure from me,
the other part gratified he thought it so powerful
that he packed the dead animal in his dufflebag and drove
from Minnesota to Massachusetts with it in the back seat.
And astonished to see it now, in its current setting,
twisting in the light.

Afterward I lost track of Ray. We had been friends since college,
him always private, a dog-eared copy
of *The Drunken Boat* by his bed.
His scoliosis was so bad he spent a summer
walking through Europe with a backpack full of rocks
to straighten himself up.
Once I went to his room to listen to Highway 61 Revisited
and came upon his diary and read a few pages,
and I felt so ashamed of myself I started a diary of my own,
in which I talked about looking at his diary.

In January I quit college and itched to Boston and spent a month
in an apartment 20 inches from the El tunnel.
Every 20 minutes the train passed near,
but my friends and I were so high we thought it was charming
when the milk vibrated in the refrigerator.
I took him to the Tea Party and the Velvet Underground was
playing
and we lay on our backs in a psilocybin haze
and watched the ballroom dissolve.

Back at college Ray began joking that he was Jesus,
and then as time passed, it wasn't so much of a joke anymore.
Without a smile he turned in a 36-page religion paper
titled simply "Jesus," and every page was blank.
The professor had him sent home to get better.

Ray, I didn't know you were gay, and I wasn't your type,
and it never mattered.
You worked for three years teaching painting
at Walpole Penitentiary,
to murderers and rapists and killers.
On the last day you told them that you were gay
because you wanted them to know you, and that a person
could be OK and still be a faggot, but you didn't want them
to feel obliged to kill you in the process.

I didn't worry about the inmates so much as AIDS.
When people started to die you assured me you didn't do
the things that put a body at risk, but I worried anyway.
You visited twice after the cat exhibit,
and Rachel and I had had two kids, and our lives
took a sharp turn away from one another.
For a while you were in Cleveland, teaching at the museum.
Then Malaysia, doing I don't know what –
and that was where I lost you.

I called your parents, I called your friends,
no one would tell me where you were or what became of you.
I needed to understand because we were friends.
You once gave me a wonderful compliment,
you called me a human being
and that was so meaningful coming from you,
for whom human meant noble and feeling and alive and crazy
was not so bad, it was a sign you were paying
attention to things.
I admired you so, and if I had the great spotlight
of the world to direct
you would be turning in it now

like that dead cat in the gallery, abused in life and abused beyond
it, ugly and craggy and ridiculous and raw
but fully engaged, all muscle and mind alert
to life and life's unlikely opportunities
and the aurora borealis would shift and slide
and light up our faces like 1977,
and the light show on the Velvets in 1968,
and that trip to Rockport in '73 when we lay in the back
of the pickup truck watching the phone lines loop overhead,
when we were young and not yet treed or backed into
impossible corners, and the world that I saw, Ray,
the beautiful courage in the crowclaws of your grin
and the manic dazzle of your eyes,
radiant artist and friend of my youth,
I would have them know.

Jacob the Crow 75 *

Down by the river the crows are calling in the cold.
Some have a metallic sound like a clang,
Others sound pinched as if the call
Were squeezed out from inside, like paste,
And spewing the last dab that is in them.

Just now I hear a sound that jerks me around,
The hairs stand spike upright on my neck.
It is the sound of a boy calling out, *Ahhh!*
The voice vibrates as if running downhill,
And the sound bounds out of him that way,
Every thump a reverberating Ah!
I expect to see him waving a mitten
From the knoll across the marsh.

But it is a crow, perched low in a maple.
It dips its beak, and calls again *Ah!*
And for a moment I believe the crow and boy are one,
And the crow is saying, I saw it all,
And I alone survived to tell.

A boy of eleven, bursting from a screen door
And running to a field, past the creek that runs
Through there, and stomping wet-footed
through familiar places,
A journey that ends in a sack in the dark
in the trunk of a car in the bearded black spruce.

75 The Brood (1992)

* This poem has a second story. The first was that, walking by the river in winter, I heard a voice that I thought was a child's but turned out to be a crow. The poet Richard Broderick noted that I used the same name for the "boy" as the name in a famous Minnesota child abduction case, the kidnapping of Jacob Wetterling. Rich cautioned me that I was assuming the pain of someone, literarily, that I had no right to assume. I had never thought that, but it seemed like a wonderful rule for reducing the amount of melodrama in poetry – you can only write about your own pain, or pain you share collectively. You don't get to "imagine" the suffering of others. A good rule for living, it seems to me. The second story is that after I posted this poem on my website I received a knowing, creepy poem written by a non-fan. Who, perhaps as Rich did, saw every evil in my "pain mongering." That letter was so scary I reported it to the FBI, and is available [at this link](#). It hurt me deeply, even as I was amazed that someone could be so affected by anything I wrote.

But when the man opens the lid the bag is empty
And the boy is gone, he was ushered away,
Installed alive in the topmost branches.
When people cluster like clucks at the scene
the black angels circling above mock their sorrow –
Why seek him here, the boy is flown.

And the eyes that adored every wild thing
Are different now, they do not blink,
The mouth never yawns, the limbs do not
Stretch out in bed at night like a song of skin
And humming blood and growing bone.

He who begged to be set loose was.
And now it is he who alights on the highway at dawn,
Stripping muscle from the runover body.
The other birds bray
About shiny tidbits fetched in the light of day,
They thrive like men on predictable dreams.

But behind the dull black bead of eye
Is a boy who knew darkness deeper than a well,
And cold more pitiless than snow,
Who knows the heart endures
What winter cannot kill,
And blinks.

Bottlework

Pick up one and tilt it in
Let it drizzle down the chin

Feel the acid in your mind
And the shiver up your spine

Feel the essence hit the stream
Feel the numbness in the brain

You are squeezed out of your skin
And issued new instructions

Like a cosmonaut out on a tether
You are becoming untogether

The heart trying in every way
To break free from the ribs of its cage

You can almost take it in your hands
And hold it against you like a lamb

Don't construct a coherent answer
That sentence must be said aslur.

Lie on the bed and watch the ceiling
Spin like a sky that is all possibility.

Lullabye ⁷⁶ *

Rest your drowsy cheek,
My girl, quiet on my
Prickling arm. Dream
Your dream of lapping
Waters cresting on this
Human form. The tides
Are breathing, you and
I, in your small clench
And my tight heart.
Tonight we fill the
Grave with stones and
Slumber in the summer's
Dew. And all I make
Are promises which can
Not come true. I will
Not give you away, my
Girl, I will never make
You cry, nor morning
Find us far apart, nor
This hand gone away
From you.

76 Water Hills (1985)

* This poem takes its title and first two lines from the famous poem by Auden. I wrote it the first month of Daniele's life. The idea was that, no matter how much I pledged my love and devotion, I could not protect her from her own life.

When You Are Pope 77

When you are pope you can not be like other men.
You cannot be seen disappearing into limos
outside casinos or polishing off a beer at a corner tavern,
the old men snorting at your caftan and cap.
You cannot affect a commanding air,
pulling at your cincture and laughing like a man,
you must be humble all the day,
you must be unworthy to loosen the bootstraps of the world,
even if you are not feeling humble, or humble has become
tiresome as a singsong prayer.
Everyone is your boss because everyone knows you
and expects certain behavior.
No spitting, no grumpiness, no annoyance with fools
for if you show any signs of being human
they will not let you be pope any more
and you will wind up on a bridge somewhere
selling windup toys or grilled kebabs and people will come up to
you squinting saying I know you.
You must always be for life and always be for peace
and never concede the fact that everybody dies
and the world is ripe with people
who could benefit richly from a ferocious beating
and everyone knows it but you are not allowed to say it.
People go on and on about this saint and that saint
and you can say nothing though you know all the evidence
in all their files,
who was too fond of the muscatel, who wrote letters
of an unholy nature,
who masturbated with the lilies of the field, and who,
when the dog the body was disinterred and the coffin cracked
the look on their face was a maniac grin,
frozen that way for eternity.
It is hard to keep up with friends.
It is just not the same once you are pope.
They are so fond of you now, fonder than they ever were before
and nothing you say gets through to them,

77 Sunset Lake (1989)

they won't let you be honest any more.
There are times you want to burst out crying
and tell them everything
what a crock the Vatican is and what assholes
the cardinals all are
and what you would give just to sit and play cards and sip gin
like you used to years ago before people stopped listening.
When you are pope you understand your career
has probably peaked,
there will probably not be many achievements after this,
it will be unusual even to catch a fish
on a Saturday in an aluminum boat, the little waves banging
against the prow, and haul it flipping into your net.
You will look over your shoulder and the lake will be full
of other boats, and film crews and helicopters,
and people will say it's not a fish,
it's an allegory, you have to think about this
on a very complex level, nothing is simple any more.
When you are pope it is sadder than you imagined.
The devout and the suffering look to you as if you had the
answers for their madness,
for the cough that has been getting worse,
for the world in arms, and the torture of the faithful over slow
flames,
and what you would do to take away the pain
but what can you do, you are only a pope.
Your faith that never let you down before
is suspect, you haven't heard from God in years,
he is like some clever zephyr that blows into town
and blows out again, now you see him,
then for thousands of years you don't,
and if gets to be too much and you start to doubt it's your fault,
where's your faith you sad son of a bitch, I was just waiting
for this moment, I knew you would disappoint me.
And now the light pours in at Castle Gandolfo,
and you awaken late and your kidneys ache
and you wonder how long you can carry the cross
for the rest of the world, and you think of a girl
you knew in school, and you wonder what became of her,

if she got old and fat and lost that look that lifted you up
off your feet all those years ago
or she is still who she was, only better,
a lifetime later, and all this time she could have been
your friend,
and you turn in the bedsheets, holding your side,
you feel as if a spear has fetched water from you,
and it is seeping away like raindrops from the body,
shiny as silver, as famous as dust.

lcky 78

was the name of her fish,
a tetra I bought her
when she was three.

we spoke to him
we touched him
and one day he died

you know my darling
I began to explain that life
is how we share our love

and it's OK to be sad
when we lose
a dear sort of friend

she finally spoke
'You know, daddy' she said
'he was only a fish'

In a Tent 79

I would like the night to be over.
I would like my mattress to reinflate.
I would like my sleeping bag to stay where I put it
and not slide toward the lowest corner of the tent.
I would like the morning to suddenly be here.
I would like the pain in my kidneys to ease.
I would like to be able to get up, find the zipper
and pee in the bushes without walking into
fresh spiderweb and imagining its builder
tightening its hairy noose around my penis.
I would like to close my eyes and dream
of happy times and happy places,
not children tied to chairs and forced
by cruel kidnappers to eat cold chop suey
with pimentos, the canned kind.
I would ask that whatever is making
that chug and response sound down
by the lake edge finish its business and shut up.
I would like my teeth to not taste like someone else's.
I would like to take a long shower
and wash my butt, and shampoo
the pine sap out of my hair.
I would like, when morning finally does come,
that I could stand and walk the way I used to,
not this rickety post-stroke hitch
last night left me with.
I would like for a day so sunny and so dry
that it would drive the damp like Rommel's camels
from my sodden bag and towels.
I would like for zippers to zip, stakes not to bend double,
socks not to electrostatically
attract pine needle, foxtail and burr.
I would like my wife, who is sleeping so beautiful beside me,
her cheekbones catching the half-moon light,
to awaken and hold me and offer me
succor for my pains.

I would like if it nature did not require this expensive
entourage for me to spend a night in it,
and I call on God with all the influence
I can summon, allowing first
that I do love the mountain and I do love the tree
to explain why the cost of a little beauty is so much pain,
while I slump like Achilles in my tent,
blinking at the canvass sky.



Witnesses 80

Three women at Perkins sit in front of me,
a mother and her daughters. The youngest,
in glasses, wears fuchsia lipstick and matching
fuchsia suit, with four silver buttons
on each sleeve. The sister has a sleepy, dragged out beauty
and unbrushed hairdo. You can make out the lines
of her brown arms through the sleeves.
The mother sits with her black pocketbook in her lap,
the strap looped around one wrist.
They appear to have rules about conversation,
taking respectful turns.
Though their eyes light up, and slight smiles glide on their faces,
not one word is audible twelve feet away, and no one laughs
or touches. I wonder if they are discussing the people
they met at the doors they knocked,
which ones seemed interested in the message they carried,
and which did not extend the courtesy of respect.
Then the food arrives, hamburgers, cokes and fries,
and the women in their Sunday clothes bow heads and pray

80 Borrowing from Minneapolis (To Pay St. Paul), 1982

The Wild Man 81

The hairy man on the concrete slab
sticks wet straw in his nose.
Once acrobat of a green bright place, once
black of eye and virginal of demeanor,
Mona Lisa ingenue,
flame hair spiking a hundred points,
everything interesting, alive
to delight and every possibility,
lingonberries bursting from within.
Betrayed by kidnappers, jailkeepers,
dieticians who take the fun out of food,
piling it in a trough beside the springdoor,
and now by time that makes
shredded unrolling tractor tires of us all.
Now denizen of the hard gray country,
he makes no unnecessary moves,
wrinkled brown banana fingers stiff with callus,
the body so attenuated once, airborne miles
from fingertip to toe, now collapsed
into rubber, a puddle of meat and hair, his body an eraser
grading the striated cement,
the look on his face a mirror of grief and disgust
the life is so boring and death is so slow.
And the sniff of the straw in the nose is as rich
and as dank as a distant dream
of roosting spots in trees,
of orchid and lemon, where the wild people
bite blossoms from their stems,
blink languidly at the tumult below,
in Papua, chewing, a long time ago.

81 Borrowing from Minneapolis (To Pay St. Paul), 1982

A Drive in the Country ⁸²

Summer was dry but the
Farmers forget and plow
The dead stalks under.
Today the wind is lifting
The first loose dirt away.
The elms in the Mahnomen
Park are striped for
Felling, and sugar beets
Litter the roads at sharp
Curves. Tree trunks lay
Scattered where they
Landed after the tornado
Of 1958. Outside
Crookston a yellow dog
Just made it to the ditch
To die, and farther
Ahead, a mile from the
Border, old shoes line the
Shoulders. Canadians are
Home now, wearing new
Ones.

82 The Beagles of Arkansas (1978)

Children 83

When we are little it is hard
to believe we will turn into our parents.
Grown-ups are so ugly and so tired
with orange pads on the bottoms of their feet,
the pores of their faces cry out surrender,
and the hair, the hair is everywhere,

But once we are grown we have only
to look at a child to glimpse what they will become.
The face fills out, the limbs acquire bulk.
The boy enters a door and exits his father
like a breed of ordinary dog.

Or the boy roars into his fruition
the malification of his mother,
her beauty beaten into him like bronze
and ramping out again
like laughter to the world.

Daily Globe 84

*an elegy for Jim Vance, who hired me for the best job I ever had,
editing the Worthington (Minnesota) Daily Globe*

daily globe is precious thing
sunshine on a field of beans
piggies grunt and cattle moo
all your friends say I love you

when daily globe is said and done
bright light in the afternoon
all the hard working people swore to
do their best by minnesota

moon down to the cuticle
deer walk through the corn
daily globe is beautiful
stillness in the early morn

okabena burning bright
on the prairie of delight
like a diamond in the sky
motorboat goes roaring by

editor of burning truth
second section reading proof
publishing his daily biz
enthusiast of all that is

daily globe is precious thing
sunshine on a field of beans
piggies grunt and cattle moo
all your friends say I love you

84 Borrowing from Minneapolis (To Pay St. Paul), 1980

The Business of Bees 85

When prices are normal
And weather cold, bees clump
In a knot, suck sugar
And hum to stay warm.

But when sugar is high
It's cheaper to dump them
Out of their drawers and buy
A new queen come the spring.

This year the bees are
Tumbling, hear: sugar
Is dear, the snow lies
Buzzing on the ground.

85 Water Hills (1985)

Thou Squid

These flapping things beside you are not wings exactly,
and never mind the cellophane feather jammed
into the body stem

And what about the tooth lodged in the heart of the tongue
like a diamond stylus, or the transparent goo
that oozes from the neck like jellied snow.

Thou creature never perched on telephone line
or the treetop of the pear,
nor soared above a frenzied field,
zombie eye alighting at the golden hint of seed.

Pulled ass-first through waters inkier than tears,
hands trailing as if pleading for someone to stop me, stop me
and these suckered lavender limbs reach out, brainless,
impelled only by the passion to swallow,
draw in the intended to the paper-punch kiss.

Gray arrow, glue mitten, thou ten-armed bandit of the shoal,
eater of mackerel and scavenger of mud,
regal bird you never were.
The Lord God of the high and the deep
blesses you in fire, savory beyond all your liabilities,
in clove and crumb thou hiss and roll.

Revolving Door ⁸⁶

Seeing the old man
Step tentatively
Into the glass cylinder,
The girl slowed down,

The two tiptoed around
One another, palms high.
He smiled at his partner,
And she, who had never before

Danced the minuet, stepping
Out with the old, stepping
In with the new, did
likewise.

86 Water Hills (1985)

The Dog of God

The dog of God has no free will.
He lives by the Master's convenience.
Left alone for long periods to fend for himself,
Nothing to drink, not a scrap in the bowl.
Parasites, ear mites, worms in the flesh.
The rapier teeth of a hundred invaders have left their marks,
And the old whiskered maw is white with the years.
A cataract clouds the left brown eye,
The malformed right perpetually weeps.
His loping gait is long since gone, he limps
And hobbles from gate to gate.
But when the Master returns from business
The hound of heaven staggers down the path to meet him,
Manged tail clapping with joy.

High in the Foothills 87 *

a man pulls fish
from a stream



87 Borrowing from Minneapolis (To Pay St. Paul), 1980

* This was my definition of a poem in 1977

Water Hills ⁸⁸

The water hills are
High today. Water
Hills meaning us, how
We break up the
Surface of things,
And make the lake we
Rise from more
Interesting.
Something burning and
Electric with
Insistence is in us,
Scratching, tapping
In our skulls. Some
Unnegotiable body of
Water rocks us in its
Arms, and in the
Distance collected
Like blue waves
Between us the man
Kisses deeply and
Longingly wife, and
The lightning
Sticking in our heads
Makes fire, each
Inhalation fills the
Sail, borne aloft by
A hand so strong the
Boat and sea obey.

88 Water Hills (1985)

The Newmans of Westport ⁸⁹

It is said that on a stormy night
when a traveler is most in need
of a helping hand they are out there
in their Ferrari, idling, extra gas
and jumper cables at the ready.

Few are the motorists who drive
the length of the Connecticut Turnpike
without receiving road assistance
from Paul and Joanne.

She waits in your car with you,
chatting of the weather,
blushing at your compliments,
coupons for popcorn and salad oil
spilling from the glove compartment.

He is immediately under your hood,
blue eyes blinking away the damp,
righting the wrong connections.

Joanne has a plate of fresh brownies,
Paul a wool sweater to warm you up.

To be of use, that is the thing,
atonement in the grease and gravel
and lesser people's luck.
This simplicity saves them from fame,
your distributor outweighs
every glory they have known.

And when the emergency subsides,
you wave goodbye and they smile
through clutched raincoats and return
to wait for the next living soul.

89 Namedroppings (1982)

God & Hippopotamus ⁹⁰

In the beginning God said to Hippopotamus:
Kiboko, I want this bank kept clean.
Your job is to keep the grass in line.

Kiboko answered the Lord saying:
Your will is my will, but please, Lord,
May I loll my sun-hours in the stream?

God thought deeply upon the matter; finally
He said Oh, all right,
Just don't eat all the fish.

Now every night Kiboko mashes clay
Between her hooves. When she goes
She shits and pisses both at once,

Her tail a propeller scattering the mess
Up and down the twilit bank
Distributing it for God to examine.

See? she says, her billiard-ball eyes
Rolling up to the moon –
No scales.

90 Water Hills (1985)

The Brood 91

I don't want to share anything with you,
I want to be alone late at night,
I want to drink until I'm dry,
I want to make secret journeys down the dank streets
where married men don't venture,
I want rooms of clinking crystal
and appreciative smiles,
jokes tumbling from my lips
like silvery grunions
slapping in moonlight.
I don't want to help carry groceries in from the car,
groceries I will never eat,
go for endless walks that take us nowhere,
rub your back when mine is killing me,
I want sleep forever under sparkling snows
and dream of ballgames and girlfriends
and the years of good times before
this dagger snaked its way into my breast,
I am afraid of waters and doctors
and the look on your face
when you are in trouble.
I want to undo everything, erase my assent,
irradiate my sperm, run off
to a nation that is beaches only,
that welcomes heels and celebrates
desertion and whose official flower
is the beget-me-not.
And yet,
to be father
of this melon thing in you
with all its sweet red stuff, and seeds and rind,
is a grand endeavor, and I see plainly in your eyes
that this is your wish and because I am your slave by heart
I accept the full penalty, let them come, let them swarm on me
like ticks, I will bounce them and change them
and wipe them clean as if they were my own

and all the while knowing where once there was life
is now only children, and the windblown fluff
that was once my hide is all that remains
of a boy who loved
to play.



In the Night ⁹²

My little girl awoke in the night
quaking with fright,
and I held her and explained
that the monsters were gone,
they were never there at all,
and the look she gave me was, I recall,
almost one of pity, as if
I were the doomed one, mine the swift
tumble coming soon.
I rocked her to sleep in her room
and thought of every plane
I wanted to see go down,
every siren shearing the dark
were heading toward my part
of town, my god, and all I
have is a child to protect me.

92 The Brood (1992)

At the YMCA

I scaled a Matterhorn on the Stairmaster machine,
ran a mini-Marathon on the indoor track,
changed into my trunks and swam the length
of the pool a half dozen times.

I showered high. Endorphins were going off
inside me like little fireworks of drugs,
good feelings about myself and the world.
Back at my locker I sat on a bench,

opened the door and grabbed my briefs,
poking my feet through and pulling them up.
My, they felt so snug, so sexy, so new!
Exercise does wonderful things to your head!

That was when I noticed none of the clothes
in the locker looked familiar. Come to think,
weren't my underpants blue with a white waistband?
I blinked at the locker, twice, saw it was somebody else's.

I rubbernecked to right and left, to see what men were near,
naked, hairy, territorial of the cloth they drape their loins in.
No one saw. I stripped the briefs off with one sweep
and hurled them back in the locker, slamming the door,

and opened my locker, and grabbed
my thin-in-the-seat underwear. To me they were very paradise.
I dressed hurriedly and ran to the exit,
I made good my escape, undetected.

But late nights I lie awake, and contemplate
the sensation of those briefs, and know I am changed.
I will never judge another man before I have stood
a minute or two in his underpants. And maybe not then.

Little Jo ⁹³

Is it irony to be old
Yet small, 86 but 4 foot 9?
Putting breakfast
Together, Jo pushes a
Stepladder from cupboard
To cupboard. My friends
Are dead and so's their
Kids. TV's no good
Since they took off
Bonanza. She stops me
In the hall one night.
You know what I'd like,
She says, before the
Rent went up and put
Her in a high-rise and
Me in a duplex, Some-
Times I'd like to go out
Like I used to and just
Run around for a while.

93 Water Hills (1985)

Glue-Girl 94

First glimpse of the child sent to replace me
Is of glassine bone and milky skull.
Two hearts quicken, ages in ages yawn.

Doctors chat and diddle buttons,
Knead the image squirming on their monitors –
A handful of centimeters from ulna to shoulder,

The gauge of the brain-pan,
The auspicious twelfth rib.
There the heart, like a tulip sprouting from the chest,

The kiss-blowing machine, the plunge
Of its pumping, the determined sucking
Already underway.

The astronaut, wound round its cord,
The slack-eyed hero, the virtueless saint
Is selfing itself into light.

I gasp, from fear.
Little glue-boy, little glue-girl,
What will you come to?

No peace, no peace.
Your home all storm, a tempest of blood,
And in all that ocean one swimmer is stroking,

Stroking and stroking,
Keen to the sound
Of thunder underwater.

94 The Brood (1992)

The Wolf House ⁹⁵

Needing a roof on a windy night
we came upon a shack above the logging zone.
We tiptoed in the twilight,
afraid someone was inside,
and if so, what they might be.
No one was there so we made our beds
and slept. In the morning
we saw the claw marks in the wood,
and the hair in handfuls,
suddenly free, and drifting
out the door.

95 Sunset Lake (1989)

My Girl, 1987 ⁹⁶

At a video store with Daniele, three years old.

She runs up to me with a movie box:

"Look daddy, it's Mommie!"

The movie is *10*, with Bo Derek in cornbraids and nylon swimsuit,

running toward you on the cover.

Oh, baby, you are the one.



96 The Brood (1992)

Sleeping On My Hands

I sleep on my hands every night.
As I pull the covers around me
and prepare to let go,
first on my right side,
then on my left,
I bunch both hands under the pillows,
holding my head up through the night.

My head must need to be held up so,
but I cannot do otherwise, they go there
on their own.
And in the morning when I awake
the stems of my wrists are sore and hollow
and my fingers numb and cold
and I feel I have been flat on a cot
donating blood all night.

Possibly my hands were intertwined so
in the drift and brine of my mother's womb,
the twist of zero gravity
for wet weeks on end.

Or my head is made so heavy
by the ordeal of ordinary living
that only my hands can prevent its sinking
forever in mattress like a black hole of gristle,
bone against wrist against skull against mind,

as if I am taken down from the cross nightly,
and set on my side in the darkness to rest
and dream of the wounds in my palms and my heart
bearing the sins of the world in my bones,
diving sideways into time.

Slugs 97

You can pluck them from their surfaces
and hear the sucking sound of their slime releasing.
Sprinkle salt on them, it is said,
and you break their chemical seal,
and it burns, and they twist from the pain.
In the rain forest they are everywhere
on leaf and stem and stone.
But on the islands where it has not rained in months,
they drag themselves on meager dew
from pebble to twig like dead men left out in the open
futile horns extending slowly
like a remark you are anxious to hurry along.
They hunch forward gradually, and the weight slides
forward like tiny beached whales
trying to make themselves comfortable.
Yellow, brown, black, red,
they make their way to some lookout place
and lift blind heads and smell salt sea.

Biker Bob Cannizarro's **Living Room Decor** ⁹⁸ *

Ignore the Iron Crosses
And posters of Nuremburg
And leather-breasted
Blondes on naked Harleys,

But drink in the tapestry
Tacked up behind empties
That might be a tribute to
Baked potatoes, clad in

Aluminum foil but isn't –
It's night-time on an arid
Beach, and the two
Astronaut buddies walk

Hand in hand in the
White light from earth –
Brushed on black velvet
And hung by the platters

Of Bobby and JFK.

98 Water Hills (1985)

* Bob Cannizarro was a biker neighbor of mine in the 1970s. He could be very rough. Sadistic even. But he had this one soft aspect.

Flying Dumbos ⁹⁹

Taking down my office before the move,
I come across a picture of my daughter and me
at Disneyland, when she was little.
Frozen in the plastic elephant, our faces a riot
of stupid joy, we float high above the pavement
between two other elephants. She is almost three,
and a veteran of seventy or eighty screenings of the movie.
Each time she sat reverently through it,
the tension building inside her soft body,
until her eyes open wider than the baby elephant's
and she cries out to the TV, mummo fie, mummo fie,
and looks at me pleadingly so that I too can
affirm the miracle of flesh borne aloft
with neither net nor magic feather,
and I take her hands in mine and clap them for her.

99 The Brood (1992)

Gise Pedersen Sets Me Straight on a Matter of Natural History ¹⁰⁰

'No, you've got this part all wrong, '
Says Gise, swatting a poem about birds
With the back of one hand.

'You have whippoorwills sobbing in the limbs
Of poplars, but whippoorwills don't perch
In poplars, whippoorwills don't perch anywhere,

Because their legs are just tiny twigs,
They are gone into atrophy, no muscle left,
So all they can do is plop themselves

Flat on the ground and make the best of it
There on their haunches. And furthermore,
What is this sobbing business? It's poetic

But hardly accurate. Their cry is more
Like a cheer, it is a call my son Peter,
Before he died, liked to imitate

On his walks home from school.
Many times, late summer nights in our cabin,
Hendrik and I would be feeling morose,

Only to hear out there in the darkness
The cry of a creature pressed close
And shouting from the cold of this earth

To all who might hear him:
VIP-poor-VEE! '

100 Water Hills (1985)

Dishwasher

It's by far the best job in a restaurant
The cooks are up to their elbows in anguish
racing to meet their exacting requirements

The waitstaff are scribbling salad orders
The barkeep's pretending to listen to stories
The coat check stares from her darkened box

But the dishwasher warms his blood at the wrists
And it goes to his heart like wonderful liquor
Everyone yelling, but he doesn't hear

The Clarinet Is a Difficult Instrument 101

I was eating minestrone
when I heard something fall
outside my apartment window.
Too dark to see much
but a pair of hairy arms slam shut
a window on the third floor
of the building opposite mine.

In the morning all I found
was a bent clarinet on cement,
dented horn and pawn shop sticker
saying nine dollars.

It reminded me of the French explorer
Antoine de la Mothe Cadillac.
He too had dreams, set sail
up the St. Lawrence, looking for China,
and wound up settling in Detroit instead.

Upon Borrowing Money To Pay My Taxes ¹⁰²

I wander down to the riverbank
where the two great rivers join.
It is a drizzly day and my shoes sink
into the brown ooze of April
like laden canoes.

I think of my accountant, pale and
eager for the rest she has earned,
the long sleep and the margarita
suspended above like a salty-eyed angel.

I rejoice in her triumph;
she is indifferent to my pain.

In the river a brown mallard quacks
and her mate quacks back,
his head and neck as green
as the money of the saved,
and I wonder why was I born.

102 Borrowing from Minneapolis (To Pay St. Paul), 1980

The Tide 103 *

complains

ish ish ish



103 Borrowing from Minneapolis (To Pay St. Paul), 1980

* I am wondering if non-Minnesotans, who may not know that 'ish' means 'yecch,' will get this. It is also the sound waves make as they slap upon the shore.

Tsunami 104

Just as the man stepped
onto the stepstool
and into the noose

a wall of water
eighteen feet at the crest
swept into the room

the voice of God says
You can't quit,
you're fired

104 Borrowing from Minneapolis (To Pay St. Paul), 1980

Elevator 105

walking through
the financial district
I smell hay



105 Borrowing from Minneapolis (To Pay St. Paul), 1980

Why Did the Buddha Sit Under the Tree?

To get to
the other side.



Christmas ¹⁰⁶

The road is a memory
lost in the blizzard
the snow is falling
sideways

The cattle's eyes are
too frozen to blink
They won't be there
in the morning

106 Borrowing from Minneapolis (To Pay St. Paul), 1980

Thank You ¹⁰⁷

To the biker with the face of a pirate
streaming slowly down Marshall Avenue,
colors jazzed in the the window
of the Pump'n'Munch,
front-wheeled Harley out to here,
leather pants and beard of steel,
my one-year-old boy craning
in his dinky blue stroller to see you pass,
like Jesus entering Jerusalem gate,
and you waved.

107 The Brood (1992)

The Pittsfield Tornado 108

Easter twister scrapes
through town, a hoe
of steel in the grip
of God.

Away with
winter's
hangers-
on
and break
fresh ground
for
plant-
ing.

108 Borrowing from Minneapolis (To Pay St. Paul), 1980

A Prophecy 109

FOR MY DAUGHTER, FOR SOMEDAY

When I was eleven my sister Kathy died,
she was five years older, born sick, a leaky heart valve
that tapped her strength and turned her blue,
and my role as brother was to fetch for her, and
I ran up and down the stairs with colored pencils,
teacups, Scrabble tiles, wires, beads, I never minded,
she was a kind girl, she thought I was funny,
she loved to draw horses, and before she died she won
one of those matchbook art contests,
with a charcoal of a black Arabian, and a year later
the art company sued us for back tuition, and won,
and that was our luck in those days, I remember
disgracing us three times the day of the funeral,
first I insisted on wearing a straw hat with a blue feather
my Uncle Jack bought at a turnpike plaza,
and making a scene when they wouldn't let me,
second I broke into a horrible grin when I saw my friends
in the pews at mass, and finally, I was caught
throwing eggs at the parked cruiser of the police escort
at the reception afterward, and watched the dripping yolk
reach down the car window and door like raked fingers,
and while people downstairs ate ham I fell on my bed
and argued with God it was all a joke, and fantasized
how scary it was to be you, carted off in a litter
from the house, blue hand clutching the sheets,
asking mommy am I going to die, and all because
you never lost your baby teeth and they were rotting
in your head and a dentist did his best and made us
sign a release but something broke, some vessel

inside you that led to your brain, and you lived
three more days in a hospital in our little town,
and what was your life but a box of notebooks
of horses and letters to Elvis and the play you wrote
and put on in the garage with the boy down the street
who grew up to be gay, and the taunts
of your classmates for being that way,
and did you awaken in the night in your bed
and wonder like me if the presence spooling in the dark
would collect your life from you like a subscription fee,
for I saw your death as a sign, a palmprint
on a piece of paper that says everyone dies
and rather than become afraid I became hard
and lived my whole youth that way, and
I suffered because I wanted so to replace you
but it was the last thing I could communicate,
and when God decided to answer my prayer
in the goodness of time and I married your mom
and became father of you children, and you blessed my life
with your beauty, it began again, the dreams,
and I cry more than ever sometimes at the thought
of a sick child hurt and dying and confused, and the hole
it blasts in the mother and the father, in my mother
who cannot talk about these things thirty years later,
she became an amateur genealogist, I think because
the dead do not disappoint, or my father,
who left for California to slam his grief and failures
behind him, there are craters of flesh opened in all of us,
kids, there is war behind every painted fence,
and I have learned no wisdom that can make this not hurt,
we are unfortunately stuck with it like we are stuck
with one another, all our lives and beyond our lives,
crybabies like sand hollering at the water to stop,
so let us have our cry and wipe our noses and

forgive me my sadness and mixing you up in my mind,
but you once had an aunt, a blue young girl
who looked like you, who won a ribbon for riding
in Pioneer Week, six months before she died, and posed
in the glory of jeweled paste, black harnesses
bearing the name Jaye, her rayon cowgirl blouse shining blue
in the lens like aluminum foil and the glass teeth bared,
a photo of weakness but how strong she was
to survive this life, and live on in my heart, that is how strong
we will have to be, courageous as children are
carried away, and have to trust the carrier,
because those hands are all they have, that a life sometimes
takes many lifetimes, to learn and laugh and know,
perhaps some mighty victory is growing in you now.

Manitou Cemetery 110

Suicide Minnie went mad because
a favored child coughed up blood

She died in the snow beside his stone,
mouth and nails black from eating clay.

Only fifteen live in town today,
but two hundred lie in the soil.

Being sensible and land being land
the graveyard was dug in the marshland.

In '59, when Jack's Creek rose
it lifted the boxes and bones of a dozen

and scattered them among
the cattails and the ratweed.

Farmboys were beaten into militia,
fewer and fewer, war to war.

Two to Manila, two in the Solomons,
one in Panmunjon, none left for Vietnam.

The inscription says *Relinquunt*,
meaning they gave their all.

All outnumber the citizenry now,
a massacre called everybody gone.

110 Borrowing from Minneapolis (To Pay St. Paul), 1980

The Bale-Door Ledge 111

This place is neither
Here nor now and
Neither are the two bare
Legs dangling from the
Bale-door or the
Congregation of
Sunflowers craning
Below for the holy
Glimpse.

Twenty years since these
Boards saw a broom, and now
The mud climbs under
The roosting beam in
Strutting sharps and
Flats.

This place that is no
Place at all is a mile
And a year from what we
Know, lifetimes of
Thought from the twitch
Of the paw of the
Injured dog lying on the
Shoulder of the high-
Way in,
Or farther on, a car
Upside down and standing
Beside it a man,
Scratching his head with
His cap.

It all dissolves, a
Dream from which the
Sleeper awakens to two
Hornets clutched and
Teetering on the wrist's
Soft skin,
And outside the terraces

111 Borrowing from Minneapolis (To Pay St. Paul), 1980

Swelling and snapping.
I think of my mother in
Her old yellow house-
Coat, shaking out rugs on
The porch.



Happiness ¹¹²

When someone is next to the person she loves,
the water in her cells laps at its thousands
of beaches, pebbles and rock
and sharp discs of light
breathe from the pores of her cheeks.
A whirlpool springs from a cloud to the west,
by an island egg in a happy sea.
A sparrow hawk flies off toward
a bank of violet mountains.
It lights on a limb of a tall green tree,
the stars alight in her branches.

112 Home Trees (1978)

Old Saw 113

Out walking with Red, we came upon
an ancient cottonwood tree, standing like
a giant fork in the forest.

Into that fork another tree had fallen,
so that the original cottonwood stood straight
while the dead fallen tree leaned into its crux,
and every breeze made the live tree groan
as the dead trunk rubbed against it,
it was the sound of a balloon roughly handled,
or metal failing underwater,
like a natural cello's lowest string
rubbed raw of its rosin.

Eventually the dead tree had worked a groove
in the crotch of the live one,
and with the passage of time was wearing its way
downward, splitting it down the middle.
One main arm of the live tree had died,
and owls and birds and other things
had made their apartments in the soft dry flesh.

Rachel and I stared up at this natural saw
and we took one another's hands instinctively
as if to assure ourselves
that the rubbing of one life against another life
was a warming thing always.

But love can come into our lives and life move on.
What is left when love remains
sawing gently on our limbs?

The Balloons ¹¹⁴

On my daughter's four-month anniversary,
I buy a dozen helium balloons
at a toy shop,
red
yellow
green
blue,
and stuff them in the back seat
of the VW.
But the day is warm, and I
forgetfully
open the passenger window
to let in air,
and as I accelerate up a hill,
I can't prevent them from bobbling out,
one after another,
crowding one another
like terrified tourists.
Pulling over by the side of the street
I watch them fight their way up
over the treetops and wires,
red
yellow
green
blue,
out of reach
before I can catch them,
gone into sky like the years
of a young girl's life.

Old Stone Enters Into Heaven 115

THE MASTER CALLS HIM TO HIS REWARD *

Old Stone was a mean man, whole
Town of Kinbrae knew that for
Entertainment he used to take pot
Shots at his dog, a good old girl
Deserving better. One day Stone was
Said to have got bad news from
Montevideo, folks saw him stride
Past the post master's kicking dust,
Spitting on the side walk and
Cussing out the Goose Town Savings &
Loan. Mr. Miller said he purchased
A package of Illinois whiskey and
That was what they found later on, a
Broken bottle by the pump house well
That'd just gone dry. Must have
Hauled his rifle down where it hung
By the stove and stomped out to the
Yard with a box of fresh shells,
Loaded and reloaded, pumped lead
Into the milk shed wall and cackled
And gnashed his nasty teeth. His
Yellow tears skittered down his dry
Cheeks as the dark deed formed in
His mind, the notion occurring to
Complete the thing for once and for
All, and he whistled Betty to heel
At his feet. And she sidled,
Shivering, up and imploringly searched
For the better nature behind his red
Eyes as he pulled two sticks of

115 Borrowing from Minneapolis (To Pay St. Paul), 1980

* I wrote this story in 1977, when I was living in Kinbrae, Minnesota. The actual story took place in Hector, Minnesota, but Kinbrae had stories too. The legwork was done by, I believe, the poet-ag activist Joe Paddock, or a history-gathering team he was part of in Renville County. My task was to make it fun. It was like stealing a pie from a window sill.

Dynamite from a tool bin and tied
Them to the poor bitch's tail, lit
The long fuse, smacked her hind end
And sat down on the hole and watched
Through the open out house door as
The dog took off yelping straight
Through the kitchen doorway and dove
Under the master's brass post bed
With the eider down comforter pulled
Down in after her. No no no no,
Cried Stone, and he screamed with
All his saw toothed might with the
Indignation of a man so wronged by
Creation perverted by willful beasts
Like a dog so dumb she couldn't even
Get blown up right, and he screeched
Her name and called her forth and
Condemned her disloyalty as the
Least best friend a most cursed man
Might have, a churlish cur who
Fought his dominion from the day she
Was whelped, who missed regular naps
Thinking up ways to undo him, him,
Him who now wailed like a ghost to
Get out, get out, get out, get out
Of my pine board, tar paper, china
Platter house God damn your four
Legged soul. And Betty, hearing his
Break down with out and imagining
Herself the object of some grand
Reprieve at the hands of this
Passionate and lovable if you really
Undertook to know him but until then
Deeply misunderstood failure of a
Man and imagining moreover her life
Long ordeal at those knotted hands
To be miraculously over and herself
Forgiven of the loathsome crime of
Having been his, dashed happily down

The rock porch steps and full tilt
And with her master's heartfelt
Cries of No no no no no echoing
Across the wooded glade leapt gladly
Into his awe crossed arms and the
Two best friends saw eye to eye,
Each bade goodbye, and left Kinbrae
Forever.



Four Jewels ¹¹⁶

for Rachel

Christmas time and you and I
And our two kids in tow,
Tobogganing down Highland Hill,
Diamonds hiding in the snow.

I remember you in spring,
I would do anything to hear you laugh.
Seeds explode and send up shoots,
Emeralds peeking from the grass.

Dismal rain at Lake Itasca,
Summertime and you and I
Curse the bugs and zip the tent,
Sapphires shining in the sky.

Our children are beautiful,
We did the best we could,
When they are gone, I still love you,
Rubies moving with our blood.

Baby Danger ¹¹⁷

The night the baby was born,
And the midwife left,
And our friends finished off the champagne,
We wrapped it twitching in a white cloth
And set it between our bodies in the bed.

Sleeping rigid as steel bars,
Terrified we'd roll upon the being
And smother the life,
And dreamed of it sliding to its death
Under dark waters,
Dreamed it fell from countertops,
Chairs, cracked like eggs on the baked varnish
Of the world.

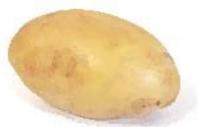
We dreamed of leaving it exposed
And found it blue and chapped upon snow,
Or turning one moment and looking back
To the crib rocking empty, empty,
All of our reasons
Suddenly missing.

There was a decade of our lives or more
When we could lie down upon cold tracks
And drink and nod off
And not worry about morning.

Now everything is heat,
And distant thunder.
The moon puts its shoulder to the shade,
Peering in like the dumbstruck

117 The Brood (1992)

Passenger on
Two frightened adults
And a small sleeping girl.



The Tracks

I grew up a road and a pond from the B&O line.
Every night the train would come rumbling through.
Not close enough enough to shake the house, but enough to make
you notice,
and maybe cock an eye to see if it was early or late.

As kids we set pennies on the tracks to flatten them like pie tins
but we could never find the pennies after.
The train carried coal and car parts and refrigerant.
I would be lying in bed, staring at my hand in the dark,
certain I was dying of some disease that started in the palm
then spread to every cell of the body,
and the whine of the train would comfort me.

A couple of kids said they lay under the tracks when a train
barreled through,
but I didn't believe them, it raised so much dust
you would die of asphyxiation
even if the wheels did not segment you like sausage.

Sometimes you saw some fellow shambling along the cinder
rocks
that slipped underfoot like they were quarried on the moon
and you wondered what wrenching loss he had suffered,
if a woman had betrayed him, had he embezzled an employer,
did a man die in a bar on a Saturday night,
and now he walked the sidings like a murdered man,
or was he just a guy whose plan fell through and didn't have a
backup.

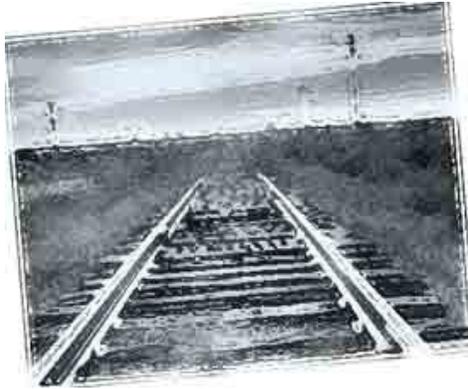
A friend and I found a dead she-goat lying by the tracks,
poor thing must have wandered and been caught in the oncoming

light.

It had been dead for a week, and we saw it was a mother from her bloated bag.

We imagined the inside was full of insects or yogurt and thought it instructive to stab the pouch with a pointy stick then run away so the glue inside would not splash us.

But stab as we might we could not break the bag because we were kids, and we didn't understand.



I Hate It More Than You Do, Marianne

'Imaginary gardens with real toads in them'

I hate it more than you do, Marianne, I hate
The sighing and heaving and jockeying
For position. I hate the having
To get into the mood, the
Chase, the coy
Cultivation
Of op-
Posites.
I hate the
Strutting that precedes
The first move, I hate the feigned
Surprise that follows.
I hate the protestations
Of no, no, as if this was not what you wanted,
All you wanted, all along, to be prodded
And forced through the hoop
One more time, and
The accent
And null,
And
The accent and
Null, till the element
Spurts from the unit out into
Its grin of decay, and afterward,
The depleted sag and the limping off stage,
The slight curl of smoke, propitiation to gods who
Couldn't care less,
And yet,
When the fit is good,
And one's hands encompass

The soft arc of the dreamed for,
The sought after circles, and all spins
Round as new as youth and as right as truth,
Like the rise and crescendo of flat stones skipped
On the water's face and I behold anew how your slim bones
Gleam platinum in the glad light of earth,
And I enter you again with a smile,
And I think the world has no
Need of this, nor
May you, but
I do.



Overdraft Notice

The blue wind that blows through the soul
blows cold, it scatters leaves and opens envelopes
with your name hovering in the cellulose window.
You know in an instant the news will be painful.
You cry my god and fall to your knees.
Sometimes you go long weeks without opening them,
sometimes you hide them under phone books
because if no one else sees them they maybe never came.

Other people's lives seem unhaunted, they write
the amount of each check and subtract it from the balance,
it is a wholly unsatisfactory way. And yet
they don't get these things all the time,
whereas you don't go six months without one, and if
you get one on a Monday chances are good
you will get another Tuesday, and even if
you go to them and thrust fistfuls of loose cash
in their hands and pockets and say please, please
take my money, and they look at you
the way people look at an unclean child,
You will get another notice Thursday.

Each one costs \$20 but you don't mind, you are glad
the bank is getting something for its trouble
and for putting up with you, you who were never meant
to carry money around or write checks
when something wonderful catches your eye.
These thin slips of paper with the blue circles
that identify your sin and decide your punishment
are your judges in this life. You bow to their power
and file them away in the secret shrine of pain,
and scurry away to places of pleasure,
bouncing end over end.

Entrepreneur 118

This spider studied real estate.
He built a web at the corner station
over the sign flashing Quaker State –
location, location, location.



Meet Me at Giant Wash 119

In the Bear's Den Bar on Franklin Avenue
a black mother bear looks down from the countertop
like a spirit through a rotten cloud of smoke,
a room of pickled faces, Ojibwe and Irish,
nearly as preserved as the beast.
I live just a block away, in a building with the porch falling off.
Summer nights friends and I tiptoe onto the sagging boards,
drink wine and watch the passing trade.
Next to Bear's Den is a laundromat that has burned to the ground,
with a mural on the side of a big white woman
in red pumps and dress, her hair in a kerchief, her lips
as red as brick, pinning up bedsheets to dry
and she is so happy, she is saying Meet Me At Giant Wash.
But she never finishes folding that bedspread
on the side of the building, they haul her rubble
away in trucks, still smoldering, because a tenant upstairs
lit up and dozed off, and that's how it goes,
one building at a time the neighborhood gets carted away,
and the big black bear, paralyzed, each hair erect
with nicotine dew, rubber lips pulled back to make her look more
ferocious than she is, teeth bared against the wrecking ball,
comes next.

119 Borrowing from Minneapolis (To Pay St. Paul), 1980

Auden in Minnesota ¹²⁰

On the worst winter evening of 1972, W. H. Auden, who had never traveled west of New York City, read from his work on the campus of St. John's University, 60 miles north of Minneapolis.

At this point in his life Auden, 76, was so grand a figure that many thought him dead already and enshrined in Westminster Abbey.

He was the poet's poet, the cigar store Indian with his roadmapped face
And perpetual cigarette, the man who could do anything with a line.

A surrealist friend and I drove up on bald tires, cars veering out of the hypnotic white at us, narrow shoulders shugging us to right and to left.

Two hours later we stomped up the snowy chapel steps and took our places in the back of the hall as the legend lurched to the podium.

He looked venerable as snow and wrinkled as an armadillo, and drunk as the situation permitted.

Toothless he slurred through the "Musée des Beaux Arts," through the homages to Yeats and Freud, and all the companions of his youth, of war and hell and golden bough and burning bird.

And no one understood a word, except once, between coughs, when he very clearly pronounced the words "old fag."

Afterward we elbowed the undergraduates for an autograph on a Modern Library edition of his Selected Poems and as I twisted out a hand clasped mine.

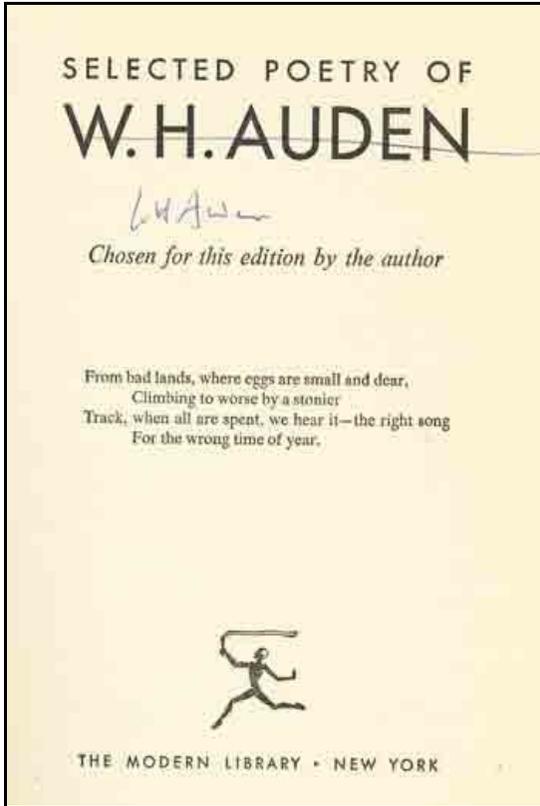
It was the hand of a professor friend, named Ted, who had written his one and only published monograph on Auden and his work, and he was too devoted

120 Namedroppings (1982)

to the master to stay at home that awful January night,
but too shy, too proud, to venture into the push and shove.

I will never forget the look in Ted's eyes as he gazed at the scrawl
on my frontispiece – actual writing of the actual writer –
“Warmest regards, Wystan.”

And being a sap, I gave it to him.



The Wreck of the Hesperus 121

On a foggy morning in '76
I idled my VW at the intersection
of Cedar and 28th Streets,
awaiting the traffic light's decision.

Stealing through the mist nearby
a two-axle truck headed for the landfill
manned by Steve and his uncle Guy,
would soon have a screaming handful.

The garbage truck in overdrive
gathered speed in lightly falling rain.
My fevered brain could not surmise
the convergence of the twain.

I heard a poem in my ear.
The light was red, but turning green.
I slipped the Superbeetle into first gear
and throttled the machine.

The truck's enormous left front tire
rolled up onto my hood,
and the truck ramped into the air,
all white and beautiful and good.

My car stopped instantly, crushed.
I watched the truck fly o'er
the intersection, and the great nose pushed
itself into the asphalt floor.

The axles snapped and spun away.
Two wheels in tandem headed east.
The great container heaved and swayed
and tipped and dumped its feast.

Coffee grounds, eggshells, cereal

121 The Ballad of the Curtis Hotel (1994)

boxes scattered wide and far.
The screeching metal carrier
scraped street and gave off sparks.

Banana peels, venetian blinds,
and Sunday comics sections.
Burned out light bulbs and orange rinds
with jotted down directions.

I saw a flattened beach ball skin
flapping in the truck's rubble.
I saw Guy and Steve stagger from within
and feared there might be trouble.

The men seemed drunk and at a loss.
Their feet met no resistance.
People on the sidewalks paused
to offer their assistance.

Me, I crawled from the front seat,
cassette deck in one hand.
I had a small bump on my head
but was otherwise able to stand.

An ancient man from a nursing home
stepped forward with accusing eye.
He gestured with his finger bone
that I was to draw nigh.

"Young man," he asked in squeaky falsetto,
"What church do you go to?"
I asked why the old man wanted to know.
"Because I want to go to that church, too."

University Avenue ¹²²

I was working at M&L Motor Supply on University Avenue across from Wards, making \$108 a week as an order filler guy while attending college part time. It was 1969.

My job was to take phoned in orders, push a cart through the warehouse, locate the parts that were in stock, box them for shipment, and backorder the rest.

This particular day I was standing on a step stool poking at the box-end of a Mopar combo tailpipe and muffler for a '64 Plymouth Fury when the pipe began sliding down toward me.

The box was eight foot long, contained 46 lbs. of hardened steel. It was falling now, falling from the stacks, sailing down to me like a bride, and it struck me on the left side of my forehead.

The blow alone would have knocked me out, a baseball bat could not have hit harder but first it sent the ladder teetering, back, back until I fell backward and crashed to the floor.

When I came to I was changed. I struggled to stand. My fingers tingled. I felt an egg, a protruding bud from my brow. I looked in the mirror in the dirty warehouse toilet and washed away the blood.

And I remembered. I had a final exam at one o'clock

122 The Ballad of the Curtis Hotel (1994)

in my class on prosody in the Humanities Building
at the University. I had completely forgot.
The Borg Warner clock over the carburetor kits said 1:25.

Snow was falling and wind was blowing,
I staggered out to the street in T-shirt, tie-dyed
but I did not feel cold. A 16-A bus was just approaching
from Hamline Avenue, and I boarded, wild-eyed.

Where's your money? The driver asked. Eighty five cents!
I looked at him like Long John Silver under the egg
and said You have to get me to the University!
and took a seat halfway to the back.

The passengers were coming home from morning shift.
One man wore a hat that said Gopher Gears,
And the same word on his jacket and thermos.
The phrase has stuck with me over the years.

I sat quiet but in my mind I was standing and telling them
Do not be afraid my brothers and sisters,
I will make the journey from St. Paul to Minneapolis,
I will do business there with TAs and professors,

I will be valorous in my actions and acquit myself
in a way you will be proud of. The assembly
and forklift people will not be ashamed this day
of one of their own climbing the heights of classical poetry.

I stepped off the bus at the University quad,
made my way to Ford Hall Room 108, burst
through the door, and every eye looked up
at the egghead from the Midway in the torn T shirt.

I grabbed a blue book from the stack and read the question:
Analyze Houseman's "Eight O'Clock" and explain
how poetic form helps further the poet's message.
Ordinarily I might have struggled in vain

with this assignment but I had been struck
by a muffler from the gods, and I had insights
I had never had before, when the pipe hit me full
it poured into me a galaxy of lights.

I knew this poem by heart somehow. I had knelt
on its floor and drunk its dark waters.
I scanned the poem in fifteen seconds and
began to write in the book, in big black letters.

"Each sprinkle of the clock tower bell
brings the condemned man closer to his time.
Each stanza of the poem is his knell,
each line a stair to, trembling, climb."

I stood and threw the blue book on the desk,
the astonished professor shrank as I left the hall
and the graduate students on scholarship
whispered about the mysterious boy from St. Paul.

I would get an A, of course, but that was not
the point, I was transformed, beyond dreams.
I stood on the walkover bridge and gazed out over
the brilliant white cloud of toilet paper plant steam.

Gods and goddesses choose us mortals not
by our bloodlines or superior mothering
but because a magnet pulls metal down from the sky
that tempers and makes us fit vessels for suffering.

University Avenue begins at the Capitol
and peters out only God knows where, in Blaine.
But I am with you to the fullness of time,
and in my bones and skull I map your pain.

Cycling 123

Biking down Laurel Avenue at ten o'clock,
I see a big man sitting in the dark under a porch roof
propped up by three two-by-fours.
At the dance studio on Snelling, with the big glass windows,
it is late, and the woman instructor stands
under a light bulb, weight on one leg.
At the store I open a door and a young girl
explodes into me, laughing.
The air is still, if you listen you can hear
the murmurs of people out walking.
Someone's been cutting the grass in the yard
of the old man across the street, who has died.

123 The Ballad of the Curtis Hotel (1994)

'The Minstrel & The Ladie' 124

The singer's message: I am only a boy
And my songs and my fiddle
My only true friends.

But the woman banging her glass
On the formica bartop is receiving
Transmissions of life in the wild,

She envisions geese lifting
From a fern-bog in the peninsula
Of a state she has never visited.

Between numbers she buys him a beer
And for a moment there is no Ramada Inn:
Young man, I want to kiss you everywhere.

But he clings to character, stammers
His Thank you Ma'am but home's a distance,
And the roads up Moorhead way are slick.

To no avail. She's deaf. Changing.
Already she's a brute brown bear
In the northerly wood,

Already enjoying the scratch
She knows comes next on her rump
On the broken spruce branches.

Mystery 125

for Daniele (1984-2009)

A scene familiar from late night,
the husband in the cellar,
struggling to rinse blood from cloth.

Now is the time for the washday miracle,
what did the paper say about removing blood,
hot water sets its rusty paws as evidence

and the world will know what was done.
See how the gelatin beads along the mesh,
the plasm of life splashed the length of it, dyed.

Taste – like coins in the pocket too long,
of things suspect, gone wrong,
of what should ever be in edging out.

Blood, blood, and the wretched Lady
wrung hands and wailed for the
perfumes of Arabia, and a gallant

man and the blade subsumed.
Blood, blood, and the last survivor
plunges the mass back into the cold.

The press said something snapped in him,
a stain that spread, a marinade of bed.
And the bodies lying in the room overhead

are still now, the seeping at low ebb,

125 The Brood (1992)

and the red-eyed husband mounts the stairs
and stands beside the sleeping wife

and newborn child.

At the Lake 126

The day has had its way with us,
and now in the glimmer
the swans steer clear
of the clank of canoes,
couples lean into one another at the hip,
and a man on a bicycle speeds by
sobbing, in red shoes.



126 Borrowing from Minneapolis (To Pay St. Paul), 1980

Wedding Presence *

for Mary Ellen & Peter Shaw

To feel this scared and happy
Is not often, and not very.

Something draws closer
Than we ever thought likely
The way the members of the family
You always belonged to
Join hands now and sing.

Wedding is a splint, a graft at the stem.
Marriage is a stack of unopened gifts.

The courage to be grown-ups
And still have the sense
To call the children in from the cold;

Memory to keep locked in the heart
Long after they get said
The promises of the day;

Ready arms to let in the world without
And acknowledge the world between;

The grace to be life-size
To be not everything but to be enough
On a typical day under topical skies.

You are invited to lie in the grass
That grows all around,

* A poem commissioned by old friends. I rewrote it a bit for the later wedding of Roy & Lucinda mcBride

Weaving and waving in the breeze

The happy hubbub of prophecy
That something great and good
Is here and now.

At the Circus ¹²⁷

ambulance lights
at the auditorium gate
and a lump on
a stretcher
and on top of that
the embroidered
red fez



127 Borrowing from Minneapolis (To Pay St. Paul), 1980

Embarrass¹²⁸

Forty minutes I stand in the reception line.
Finally I reach the newly widowed man,
standing by Olive's open coffin,
and I will remember these words forever.
'Hey Vern, great to see you.'

128 Borrowing from Minneapolis (To Pay St. Paul), 1980

Since She Died

I am in a restaurant
unwrapping a napkin
when for no reason the people
stop sipping coffee,
become monster babies
from a monograph of freaks
cyclops baby, girl with no brain,
hour-old faces that didn't quite
make it, dry eyes crossed
with expectation of death.

I wish I could salve this feeling
like I butter a roll,
but bitterness is not a face you make
its roots punch through you
and tangle the heart.

Families are joined together
like paper dolls,
then pulled apart at the arms,
and the rest of the village,
well-issued and well-nourished
with all the right parts
in all the right places
peruse their menus
like passengers on a train,
their eyes on the scenery
ride innocently over
the rust-red tracks.

Death as Snack Cake ¹²⁹

the grave's a fine
and spongey place
a twinkie of an eye

and we who dreamed
so many things
are the filling surprise

129 The House of Murk (1972)

Damn Your Eyes ¹³⁰

blue windmills turning sunlight into bread
the murmuring turbines of you

the gills of the goldfish
in a porcelain tub

languid petals of unplugged fan
spiraling in the breeze

quick wink of the guillotine
flared skirt of mushroom

lightswitch squirting darkness
through the room

venus flytrap closing on
some hungry living thing

130 The House of Murk (1972)

Trompe l'Oeil 131

The painter's wife
Turned her back on him
And went to sleep. He
Went to his studio and
Set up his easel and
Painted a picture of
Snow falling on a small
Wisconsin town. On one
Of the whited-out
Streets was a house with
Green shutters and a
Streetlight shining on
An upstairs window. The
Man and woman inside had
Undressed, a pair of
Shoes lay under the bed.
Before climbing in, the
Man bent over and
Brushed the dust from
The soles of his feet.
I know, the stooped-over
Man was saying, I will
Rise up early and paint
A picture of snow
Falling outside our
Bedroom window.

131 Borrowing from Minneapolis (To Pay St. Paul), 1980

The Lord God Addresses the Convocation of Poets

You who puff yourselves up with words,
hear me now.

All you who achieve with the arch of an eyebrow
what you would not do with honest toil.
You who are persuaded that living sordidly
lifts you above these other my creatures,
who imagine that I harbor special grace and store

for the masturbators and malingerers
of this my world. (Yes!)

You who imagine that being unable to speak simply
and without design
are signs of my special favor.

Blow trumpets, howl winds, swirl gyres of ocean and cyclone and
rage.

I break with the poets of the field and the air,
I deny the poets of the heather and hearth,
I forswear the poets of water and land
who get it wrong more consistently
than idiots quaking in the square
or misbegotten monsters who live but an hour
goggle-eyed in their mothers' maws.
Break thunder, break cataracts, break trees at the knees,
break promises not to destroy you again
in a boat, in a fire, in a meteor blast.

While you amuse yourselves that I send muses
to each of you
to draw out the milk of your beauty,
as if legions of angels had nothing better to do
than attend to the daydreams of lazy vanity,
pet preference of the I-Am.
O, do not play footsie with the whirlwind,
do not make nice with death-in-life,

Crush granite, strike planet, crush heaven with one swipe,
curse me as a jealous god that I am harried by these gnats,
will no one relieve me of their pretense?
I've grown tired of the customary acts of faith,
widow women turning on spits,
infidels lighting the streets into town –
I want a special cut of meat from my subjects,
the hearts of their poets pierced en brochette,
the best minds of their generations sauteed.

Down with the poets, commence the crusade.
Line them up and start shooting, mow them down in my name.
Begin with the successful ones in the same towns as you,
the men and women in salons who know
that if they were in any real place
and not some jerkwater parish far from Rome
they would be nobody at all.
The people who get endlessly recycled in anthologies,
panels, talk shows, the works,

they who have started to take it for granted
that they are the spokesmen for nature's art,
the voice of the flowers, the agent of the wood,
and talk and mince like boneless politicians.
Have them get ready to bathe.
Then get the street poets who might have amounted to something
because at least they had energy
if only they'd set aside being mad at people who've done them no
harm
but that would mean losing the attitude

that is their weapon of choice
in an unworthy world so forget that.
My apocalyptic friends, you would not know an apocalypse
if one bit you on the ass.
The pagan poets – find them, tell them
the Lord God Jehovah says –
BOOGA BOOGA!
The surrealists – find them! Tell them who would make madness

an artform that I won't let them be crazy.

Hobble their imaginations, hamstring their minds,
let them be prisoners of syllogistic logic,
unable to free-associate or make the jettes of thought
that make them feel superior.

The solipsists – let every reality be real except theirs,
let their mirrors explode and the shards eviscerate them,
In the hall of death let them be hamburger.
I want files of dadaists turned into actuaries,
hauling their crossbeams up the ancient hill.

The suicide poets – dig them up,
and reshape their mouths into smiles,
hang lobster bibs around their necks,
put them to work doing community service,
for the people they shucked off and the examples they set.
The myth poets who walk in the shadows of shadows,
drive them out into the light,
invite them as guests to our poem pogrom.
And the introspects who do not get out of bed

until every dream is written down, rouse them and tell them
I have something nonmetaphorical to share with them,
Real spikes and real nails, and broken teeth and broken bones.
Call in the botanical poets and the bird poets from the fields –
naming things and reporting on their noises and smells,
and in all matters particularizing,
imagining this is what I do with you –
find them, mulch them, restore them to their world,
the rich good manure of poets.

The social poets who don't write much
but never miss a party,
tell them they won't miss my party,
I've got them on my list.
With a bullet.
The alcoholic poets with the hair-trigger responses
and faltering follow-up,

who sought refuge in the weak stuff, spirits of grain,
their flame will be smokeless, clean and blue.

Tell the writers of confessional poems their penance
shall be infinite fire throughout infinite time.
Tell the poets of rhymed verse my favorite poet is Whitman,
because of the resemblance.
Tell the feminists about my long white beard.
Tell the writers of love poems I hate them.
Tell the poets obsessed with rhyme and meter
that a clock is ticking
in their asses, and their moment of glory is nearly come round.

Light ovens, start fires, pitch boil till blackness
fills my nostrils like perfume.
The smoke of a thousand poets in residence,
who communicate in surreptitious form
the lack of respect extended them in departmental meetings
because they don't know anything anyone with a brain
lodged inside a skull would pay \$100 an hour to learn.
Feed to the reaper the country poets who drive into town
to depict the horrors of the street in verse.

Feed to the incinerator the city poets who take the highway out
to bless the headwaters and mouth the names of dead medicine
men,
whom I personally know,
and who if they saw you standing there, spiral notebooks at the
ready,
would split you down the middle
with an adze, or an atlatl,
they were good honest people don't you know.
Torch their jackets with the patches on the elbows,
string up and debowel their pedigreed dogs,

bring me the beating heart of the ceremonial poet
assigned the dedications of new gymnasiums
and alumni center parking ramps,
flay the chancered workshop poets who labor with laser

and page the world with simultaneous submissions
of the same thick verse a hundred times over,
a backbreak of postmen, a slaughter of spruce
and for what, some pointless exercise in imitability
that gives pleasure to neither reader nor world,

slack stillborn refraction of art,
a bag of vomit from an unclean mouth,
vanity everywhere, top and bottom,
fetch matches, fetch torches, fetch fire.
Rage, quake, pestle, shout,
all the pretty ones blotted out,
Women poets ploughed with lime and the men enriched with
manure,
Invite every glad spirit who puts down the words,
the terribly timid, who confide the only truths they know

to incomprehensible lines that no one will read,
O, their fragile courage moves me so,
how do I attend to the business of keeping the bodies in motion
and the atoms charged
knowing they are having a bad day in a dormitory in
Pennsylvania,
heap them high like hosannas of unexercised flesh.
Death to the clay-faced outdoorsman who writes in a cabin
deep in the woods by the light of a candle and trust fund.
Death to the radical poets who assailed the princes

that I myself had installed,
making their jobs even more impossible and unpleasant
than I had made them to begin with
O you who make life difficult but sleep in till ten,
draw tenure, clink glasses late into the night,
You're highly regarded, you're very well read.
I grind your bones to make my bread.
My prophecy is plain, my prophecy is pain,
my prediction mass graves and smoking soil,

nutritious to the earth beyond all reckoning,

they that held such store in words
instead bequeath calcium, nitrogen, zinc as their gifts,
their limbs interwoven in a tapestry
that puts the lie to their individuality,
O, that one there, row four hundred, two hundred sixty-fifth from
the right,
did you know he was a genius, a genius, a genius, a genius!
My geniuses are cloth.
Come to my supper and sit at my table,

hens and chickens stewing in your broth.
I turn all your whining water to sangria,
all your crumbs to angel food.
You are fit and right and meat to me.
Climb inside the warm abode I have prepared for you
for a trillion churning years.
As you are creators
and as I am creator
let us now be as one,

alive
in the
LAVA
of language.

The Sugar Trap 132 *

To keep yellowjackets from our tentsite
I filled a pop bottle half-full
with sugar water and strawberry jelly.
As the day grew warmer the bees would alight on the rim
and one after another descend
to sample the pink nectar.
By day's end there were over forty bees in the bottle,
most of them drowned
with a few still clambering over
their fellows to climb out.
But the walls are too steep
and their wings too wet
and the water is too sweet
to avoid very long.
First they fly down, and spin inside the bottle,
delighted with their find,
enough sugar to feed their community for a month.
The sight of their comrades floating face-down
does not seem to be a major minus to them.
It is only when they set that first foot
in the water that they suspect,
and the struggle to rise up somehow is on.
It is impossible, they fall back
into the sticky syrup, their wings now covered.
Furious, the start twitching their abdomens.
This must be someone else's fault,
they seem to be saying,
I never sought sugar for my own personal use,
it was always for the hive.
But community mindedness has fled
and in their wretchedness
they sting their comrades the dead and the dying,
spasmodic, undulating, thrusting in their pool
and this can go on for hours, and more.

132 Sunset Lake (1989)

* This poem was picked by editor Michael Heffernan as one of the top 50 poems ever to appear in *Midwest Quarterly*.

I did not see any bee trying to warn off any other bee
either by gesture or sound,
even though the arrival of the newcomer
spells sting after sting.
It is as if in their misery they call out to come join them.
It is good to share this meal my brothers
it is good to drink the common cup,
so cold, so sweet,
this wine.

From the Roof of My Apartment Building in Downtown Minneapolis ¹³³

the moon is down to the cuticle now
the stars nod in and out

the night is as dark
and as deep as the hole

in the shed of the potato farm
in Michigan that my grandfather Mulligan

had, and
then lost

133 Borrowing from Minneapolis (To Pay St. Paul), 1980

Cleveland, 1959 ¹³⁴

Tranquility of a town
even though we're a big city.
Pedestrians leave home early,
take ten extra minutes
to stroll to the office.
The street seems cleaner than usual,
some critical flotsam is missing.
The bus leaves the curb
with a thrill of exhaust.
The birds sit
on the courthouse pediment,
and they are coy about some secret
or other.
The Press and Plain Dealer
have been on strike
for over a month.

134 The Ballad of the Curtis Hotel (1992)

Haircut 135

When my stepdad was dying of a brain tumor,
we hired a barber named Dave to come round every week.
Dick didn't have a hair on his head,
after chemo, not one – but he liked talking to Dave,
who also sold insurance and awnings.
Dave would pretend to cut hair
for half an hour or more, chatting about
the kids today, or an open lot
where a supermarket might go.
And Dick would nod, or grunt –
he had no words left in him – with half open eyes.
I think he was pleased to be served,
to be the man, that ghost hair was still coming
out of him, unstoppable, wild.
When Dave was done he carefully brushed the excess off,
shook the cloth off on the porch,
let nothing ride away on air.

In the Hot Springs Parking Lot 136

They move in slow, small steps across the blacktop,
Three sisters in their sixties of indeterminate accent,
Perhaps Czech-Canadian, advancing toward their car.
Their feet are small but their legs and arms are plump,
Made tender by the waters, their heads tilt
As if vital news has just been imparted,
That may relate to a loved one, a daughter or niece
Whose future hangs in the balance of what each
Has felt for years but only now is sharing.
They have been soaking in sulfur springs the past hour,
At the treeless foot of a mountain of slag,
Aqua playing on their smooth pink faces,
When some wisdom began to form between them
And now they move toward separate cars and farewell
I would like to greet them, to honor them
Because beauty rushing out of their pores
And pausing in this purposeful moment.

Dead Bee on a Book by Philip Roth ¹³⁷

Imagine a man of raving demeanor,
Driven to nonsense by torture and desire,
Life as prolog of sneezing excess
And epilog of trembling apology,
Pages and chapters of unspeakable crimes,
Lambsblood let upon every letter,
And still the knee can not bend,
Antiheroic to the end.

Picture a creature true to his race
In the preservation of all that is sweet
In the neck of the illiterate flower,
Whose enemies are frost and a liege
Too busy to be a friend,
Heroic to the very end.

They lie prone, dog-eared together
In the rear window of my Fury,
Striped husk and desiccated book.
The book I left too long in sun,
The bee because he was
Kidnapped in my car and held ransom
From his queen, a hundred epic yards from home.

137 The New Yorker (1996)

The Dogs of Madison Square 138

The leaves blow across the old park,
the hickory and ginkgo,
linden and oak, next to the monument
of eternal light, for the fallen soldiers
of the first world war, and beside that,
a sign on a tree saying, caution,
a rat poison called Mak1
has been placed in this area;
its antidote, if you are resourceful
about these things, is Vitamin K-1,
you probably have some in your house,
if you can get there in time.
But the dogs roaming the sixteenth
of an acre of fenced-in grass
by the Flatiron Building can't read.
A big-chested pointer, a doberman
and an old teat-dragging Labrador,
plus a Scottie, cocker spaniel,
and some kind of greyhound all gather about
as she defecates, and it is entirely
fascinating to these dogs about town.
She bows, cowed by their attention
as she squeezes it out
and they are delighted with the whole business
and beat their tails against themselves, no,
their eyes never really seem to lock
onto one another, because their joy
is somehow outside what they are,
it is in the rich aromas in the air,
the unleashed freedom they feel
behind their heads, and their
damp maws open wide
like smiles.

Minnesotan in New York 139

When I landed at LaGuardia
it was seventy degrees,
all I needed was a thin jacket.
For three days I walked the streets
leery of beggars who seemed
to know something, and shadowy
figures lurking in doorways.
But when the temperature began
to fall and the canyon gusts blew
plastic sacks like ghostly luggage,
I came into my own.
I am more used to winter than them,
it is my element, walking into wind
swinging my computer case at my side.
All along Sixth Avenue phalanxes of muggers
and murderers part, melted
from their purpose by sled dog eyes,
urgent and cheerful on a cold,
cold night.

I Saw a Deer, Now I Must Write a Poem¹⁴⁰

I saw a buck bolt onto Highway 5, down by the airport,
where workers are fixing the bridge.

Suddenly it was there, standing by the shoulder,
its side all rough as if scraped against stone,
then bolting into traffic, dodging cars,
leaping over the lane divider,
skidding away from a trailer truck, then vaulting
onto a bank of unaccustomed slag, and dancing, whitetail
bounding, back into the trees.

The wrong place at the wrong time, rush hour,
it was lucky it didn't get run over.
Motorists were shocked, workers stared open-mouthed.
The frantic look in the deer's eyes spelled
terror, confusion, the suggestion of reproach.

Deer and construction sites don't mesh,
the deer so fragile sprinting between bulldozers.
The overarching sense that road construction is wrong
and cars should pull over and give the natural order
the right of way and any poet seeing a deer
in the wild must file a complete report,
express solidarity with the animal,
remorse for the thud of mankind,
acknowledge complicity in the hazing
of innocent blood.

I was thinking that if deer
had short legs and made grunting noises
there would be fewer poems about them.

140 Sunset Lake (1989)

Full Up 141

The wooden barns are coming down,
Whether they are the giant-breasted kind
Collapsing from the weight of too much hay
or the countless sheds and coops
that have started to lean in on themselves,
They have had it, it is finished.

The center beam of this great red beast
off the turnpike near Defiance
was good for a hundred years
And caused many to at least
Consider chewing Mail Pouch.
But a century of wind, all that lightning, that rain
And all that standing exposed
In the hot Ohio sun take their toll.

The people who live on the acreage
are cannibalizing the wood for fuel,
every day pulling a board away for burning.
All that will remain will be the limestone foundation
An open ruin with neither roof nor walls,
A reminder of the Germans and Swiss
Who put up these planks.

What will replace them
Are corrugated sheds, more efficient in every way,
With sliding doors and guttered tops,
No need to store hay any more, so one story
Is as good as two, and cheaper,
But the feeling's not the same,
Of these burly brothers who stood a hundred years,
Sad and red and full to bursting.

Frankenstein in the Cemetery *

Here is where

I ought to be.

And here.

And here.

And here.

And here.

And here.



* This is the only poem of mine that Daniele ever told me she liked. Figures. It describes a scene in *Bride of Frankenstein*, where the monster waxes homesick for the graves of the bodies he is made of.

After We Got the Dog ¹⁴²

Daniele paper-trained him in her room.
She who was so squeamish
put up with his poop and his pee.

And she guided him through it,
he was quick to learn
and proud to do it right.

One night she came to me crying.
Oh daddy, she said,
I love him so much.

142 Sunset Lake (1989)

Signs 143

Every hundred yards in the Wisconsin woods
there are signs posted saying
No Hunting and No Trespassing.
People leave their cabins when the weather gets cold,
and they do not want to return to a shot-through window
or knocked over pumphouse.
A good sign, suggesting violators will be prosecuted
seems to keep most people away, except for
a few hunters who need everything spelled out.
You can tell a salesman made his rounds some time ago
because the dayglo veneer has peeled away from every sign
leaving three dry leaves of plywood sheeting.
So that every hundred yards is a tree
with a perfectly blank sign on it.
The gray of the bark crisscrosses the knots
and whorls of the plywood,
gray from the rain and north woods wind,
an advertisement to wilderness,
a message the animals read as well as you
saying this is this and here is here
and deeper into the pines there is more.

I, Gilgamesh ¹⁴⁴

I was an ordinary king
I lived and ruled and learned what I could
and of all the world I loved
the monster Enkidu
who fought me and was defeated and
became my servant friend
and died and broke my heart again
In my grief I beheld fire squirting
from the wounded loins of Humbaba
I wooed Ishtar to determine the secret of death
and I stood on a promontory and witnessed Father Anu
create the bull of heaven and later
divide the bleeding beef and eat of it
and thrust as an insult an offering
into Ishtar's swollen mouth
and the rain of stones that continued for weeks
and fell upon Uruk, domed capital of the world,
and Uruk mourned the dead and dying
and many tablets of wet clay
were cleft that day with lamentations
of the priests of all the people
I asked Utnapishtim to put me at peace
and he prattled on about the cleansing flood
and the miracle plant that made men live
beyond this life and into the next
but the plant was swallowed by a giant snake
and destroyed men's hopes forever
and now I Gilgamesh am retired
to my house of myrtle wood
to dream of long departed friends
and breathe the smoke
of their memory

144 House of Murk (1973)

Priests 145

Even on the most sweltering days
when cement workers and waitresses
were tottering in the pews,
the priests suited up in all the layers –
alb, cincture, chasuble, stole.
The acolytes looked on with open mouths
as the priests dressed, muttering.
They appeared powdered, as if with corn starch,
their pale parts blanching in the gymnasium light.
Their hands fluttered through the blonde cabinetry
alighting on oils and incense, linen and gold,
muscatel, ribbons, and thin coins of bread,
the looks on their unlined faces all duty,
half lonely men, half swans.

Horses Work Hard 146

they clamp their bits in the riding ring
kicking the sawdust behind them
all day the children mount and pace
and when the animals rest
steam rises from their bodies like prayer
and they turn their heads and snort
when the last class is over
and the girls ride home in silence
in their vans
the horses are let out
to find solace in the grass

Dot's Cafe 147

A cup of coffee is a joke
the night tells
awake in the dark
in the unsponged booth

Vapor fogs the phone
booth door
my quarter falls forever
down a well

Bugs pack against the screen
surrounding
and disarming
in the hi-beam

Headlights scatter
sudden rain
small faces
on the windowpane

A cup of coffee is a kind of kiss
lip to warm lip
then leave a napkin poem
as a tip

Ride

Fifty five miles is fine for us
but angels take the local bus

You stare and watch the city wheeze past
The next corner as good as the last

Young women talk to one another
Years before either is a mother

Young guys sets his bike on the rack
It will be dark before he gets back

My seat mate wishes I weren't there
I don't care

The driver beats me to it at the door
No, you have a nice day, sir

Hard Frost 148

Late in October, and leaves have been falling for weeks.
My dog and I are walking by the river, by a backwater
wearing a new skin of ice, with white vapor seeping from the
wounds.

As the sun creeps over the ridge, its rays hit the tops
of elms and beech trees, and it is like a chain reaction,
the warmth causes leaf after leaf to loosen and fall.
I imagine what it is like in the leaf to be so cold all night
and all the softness of the sugar factory is killed,
so the sun is like a raygun that blasts you from your perch,
and you fall, all at once, as the sun finds more and more of you,
falling all at once like wax soldiers in a failed offensive,
falling like soap flakes in an old-time flicker from the Yukon.
And they lay in a heap on the green moist ground
like panting dogs
who have been out among trees, chasing all day, and can only
grin now like the agitated dead.
Because the trees are closing shop for the season,
they are going away from the green and away from the birds,
the trees are departing for a different place.
They are not dead,
they are only gone, and these branches they leave
as remembrances.

Be Patient!

A poem by Jalaladdin Rumi (1369-1420)

I've said before that every craftsman searches for what's not there
to deepen his craft.

A builder looks for the rotten hole where the roof caved in.

A water-carrier keeps an eye out for the empty pot.

A carpenter pauses at the house with no door.

We rush toward any hint of emptiness, which we then replenish.
All happiness starts with emptiness, don't think you must avoid it.
This empty cask, this chilling apprehension, this anxious
possibility –
contains everything you need!

Dear soul, if you were not friends with the vast nothing inside,
why would you always be casting your net into it,
and waiting so patiently?

This invisible ocean has given you such abundance,
but still you call "death" the thing that provides you all sustenance
and work!

God in his good humor allows magical switcheroos in our heads.
Thus we see the scorpion pit as an object of wonderful desire,
but the abundant oasis around it as swarming with peril.

The body's certitudes are like somebody on your payroll
who doesn't quite know all the ropes,
an unreliable employee you must bring along slowly.

That's OK, be patient, because patience is how
your capacity to love and feel peace takes root in you.

The patience of a rose by the thorn is what makes it fragrant.
Patience gives milk to the young camel, still nursing in its third
year.

The beauty of your mother's careful embroidery on your shirt
is the patience she poured into it.

Be with those who mix themselves in with God
the way honey stirs slowly into milk, and say, with me,
"Anything that comes and goes,
rises and sets,
up and down,
over and over,
cannot be what I love."

Or else ... be like a caravan fire,
left to flare itself out
alone
beside the darkening road!

not translated, but mulled over and paraphrased by Mike Finley

Columbus Circle 149

It is two in the morning, and the sound
of air hammers and chainsaws
from a night construction crew
fetches me from bed.

The view from my hotel window
doesn't quite include Lincoln Center,
kitty corner, though the hotel
celebrates its tradition of putting up musicians
and singers and actors overnight.

What I do see is a triangular patch of grass,
and a statue of Dante,
his laurels blending with the dead leaves of November.
He gazes out on 63rd Street and Broadway, humorlessly,
like a man who knows his way around infernoes.
Besides the immortal poet is a bus stand advertising
Eternity by Calvin Klein.

It is late, and the traffic has begun
to die down. Down the sidewalk
comes a man who is drunk.
Each step is an essay and not all
are successes. He is like a mime climbing
an imaginary rope, a phantom walking through
new falling snow, that melts on
the shoulders of statues of poets,
and I, too excited to sleep in my hotel bed,
know exactly how he feels.

Applause for Crow 150

I believe you are the blackest bird I ever saw,
blacker than blackbird or raven, grackle or daw.
Your wingspread blacker than onyx without flaw,
Lacquered jacket black as a chew
of tar or ink or the mountain blueberries in your crow.
Your eye so keen there ought to be a law,
Diving down and snatching every stray gewgaw
Clutch of diamond, gum wrapper or straw,
snatched quicker than a talon or a monkey's hairy paw,
spurs remorseless as a mongoose claw.
Mightier in legend than the donkey's jaw,
from the ice of January to April's dreary thaw,
from summer's roasted pastures to autumn's hem and haw.
Your disdain for the usual forest foofraw,
your pitilessness for feathered things carried off in a wet dog's
maw,
and tendency to repeat yourself are transwoodland topics of awe.
Over and over every morning, the first breath I draw
that voice like tearing paper, only still more raw,
the hard spank of morning cries caw

Nine *

I think it must be exceptionally fine
To discover oneself at the ripe age of nine.

Nine is so swift on the hoof and so fleet,
Nine is so hard on the growing of feet.

Nine is so elegant, ermine and silk.
Nine is so everyday, chocolate milk.

Nine is so ancient, the product of eons.
Nine is so modern, an apex to be on.

Nine is so stalwart, so bold and so brave.
Nine is timid, crouched in a cave.

Nine is exemplary, a regular role model.
Nine is tight jeans that make you waddle.

Nine is the age to explore many areas.
Nine is the age to think life is hilarious.

Awkward and clumsy and falling downstairs,
Graceful and delicate, walking on air.

Halfway to womanhood, working, and college,
Think of the expertise, think of the knowledge!

Think of your doddering, slobbering father
Who always thought you could walk on water.

Nevertheless, here you are, here am I.
Who could be prouder, who makes me cry?

I would do anything you ask me to,
Quack like an elephant, shout like the dew,

* A birthday card, 1993

Save you from earthquake and mudslide and viper,
Save you from having to launder a diaper.

Save you from heartache and meanness and strife
All of the days of the years of your life.

I'll save you from all these things while you're nine.
Because I will always want you to be mine.

I've done a couple of things pretty well,
But my masterpiece goes by the name of Daniele.

Excruciated

Jesus was a suicide
He blamed it on the cops
Do what you have to do,
he said
And died upon the cross

The New Yorker 151

The woman crouched in a blanket in the slush
on 46th street is taking deep breaths
during rush hour.

She is wet and cold, she has no place to go,
and winter is only beginning.

Citizens with destinations stride by her
in pressed clothing
and their faces tell their feelings.

The broker's displeasure with the city's
condition, and the daily pained reminders of
suboptimalization.

The pretty account exec's cheerful denial
that a bad fate might await her one day.

The tourist who, seeing another person losing
a handhold on life, is afraid for himself.

You want to stand the woman up,
slap the sleet from her hair and send her
on an invisible errand,

giving phone sex or counting traffic or
handing out bills to busy pedestrians,
but God has made her incompetent

and us indifferent, except for one woman
in a strawberry hat, who walks past, stops,
fiddles with her pocketbook, and places
a five in the paper cup.

The Addict 152

In the clinic waiting room.
A guy enters on his mother's arm.
She is the sick one, but he looks bad –
hollow-eyed, hostile, multiple tattoos –
you can see the bullets under his skin.
While he stares emptily at the furniture
she keeps nudging him and making funny remarks.
At one point she says, "I've got a good idea,"
leans over and whispers something in his ear.
The man blushes and smiles,
and turns to look at his mother
with unimaginable softness.

Penn Station 153

Passengers hug their luggage close
and check their watches as they wait
by the message board
for news of the delayed train.
There is anxiety in people's faces.
One woman clasps her red gloves and keys in one hand.
A student looks up at the board with open mouth.
Then the letters start flipping and
the speakers announce that the train
to Princeton Junction is cleared for boarding
and everyone breaks for the steps down to Track One,
clambering down like a centipede in suit.
Once situated in our seats, we look up, out, and away
as the conductor announces that a bridge in Newark
is causing problems,
and there will be an "indefinite delay."
A groan goes through the car like an infantry taking fire.
"Jesus Christ," mutters a man in a long coat,
who looks like he is about to cry, and who obviously
has someplace important he has to get to.
He and a dozen others bolt to their feet,
grab their bags and rush back up the stairs
to find a ride on another line. No sooner
are they gone than the address system announces
that the problems in Newark have been resolved,
and the car begins to slide forward in the station.
I ask the conductor if we couldn't call
the people back, and end their suffering.
The man just punches my ticket, smiles and says,
"You're going to be just fine."

Happy The Frog ¹⁵⁴

Suspended anima-
tion is a trip.

The grin extends
from ear to lip.

The gullet swells
And lets one rip.

The legs extend
from toe to hip

And into pea soup
Smiling slip.

Instructions for Falling ¹⁵⁵

We have to let go in order to fall
And the steady tumble that carries us down
Surrender all order, unclench every hand
Until we are sleeping, and begin again



Maury ¹⁵⁶

Every day it gets more real, real blood,
Real punches, that's a real big brassiere
On the woman from Klamath Falls.

But the effect is like some circus
Where the sweat and pee of the show-ponies
Is bled into a plastic cup.

Instead of feeling connected you feel
A million years removed,
Detached from the remarkable people

Bellywhumping their loved ones,
Remote from your neighbors down the street,
From the people you are supposed to love.

The cord connecting set to wall
That unplugs you from yourself,
And some sharp pitchfork poking holes,
Ignorance is snapping up residential real estate,
A volcano is growing in the cornfield.

156 The New Yorker (1996)

Sea Urchin

Eyeless and legless, the Pacific sea urchin,
which resembles a red spiky ball,
appears immortal –
though the average life span is 30 years,
many live to be over 200
with no sign of deterioration.

Sure, you can kill them,
just pop them in the blender
or squash one with a cinder block.
And there are diseases they succumb to.
But statistically, a century-old red sea urchin
is just as apt to live another year
and to reproduce
as one that's only ten.

In his *Historia Animalium*,
Aristotle described the urchin's mouth
as a lantern with five sides,
a lantern that never went out,
so they stopped eating,
the secret to long life.

Another thing, as juveniles
they seek out the company of adults
they are not related to,
safe strangers they can hang with
and learn from.
No mother, no father to bring them down,
no one who knows them
to give them away.

Ski 157

The snow is like cream
flowing down the ridge
along the cracking river.

A flock of geese
against dusted firs
alter their direction

like a human hand
moving through water.



Minivan 158

We could not afford a good one but this
was good enough for us,
brown high-rider, automatic, slant six.
When we bought it we were in awe,
it smelled like road angel,
and though it had already rolled
ninety thousand uphill miles
with strangers in its seats
we felt it had been waiting all along
for us. I washed it, and stickered it,
and drove it to the store.
We were partners, it and I.
So when I left it for an hour at the park
and some guy smashed the passenger
window with a tire iron and stole
several hundred dollars of audio tapes
I got at the library for our trip out west,
I blamed myself, I should never
have left my treasure alone.
And when we sailed west through badlands
and buttes, and we filled our thermos
at Wall Drug, and bought doughnuts for the kids
it was with a new covenant between us,
a promise to take care of her.
We parked it near the motel door every night,
we locked it up and took the cameras inside.
And when I left our wallet and cash
on a trash receptacle at a convenience store
high in the Montana Rockies,
and we realized it was gone
and had a look in our eyes that had elements
of hope and elements of despair
and we sped back twenty miles up the mountain
our minds hard from wishing,
and there it was, people walking by,
good decent wallet-ignoring Montañards,

and we drove on, toward the Idaho border
and beyond that, to the brightening sea,
tearful with happiness and love
for you, Grand Voyager, for you.

Cannon Falls 159

The sidewalk is beautiful,
one of those dry crystalline snows
that shine in the moonlight
like white sparking wires.

We ate too many rolls at the supper club.
Back at the bed and breakfast,
the bubble lights on the Christmas tree
are boiling.

Rachel reads on the sofa,
I sit in the library and pull book
after book from the shelves.
Baseball books, history, politics, poetry.

In one is a poem by Jon Silkin
about the death of his child.
It is so heartbreaking I read it twice,
and the sorrow saws through me.

Suddenly I don't hate poetry,
it is not false or vain or unimportant,
it is a way to talk and think
about things that matter most,

because in a hundred words
I felt the stab of the boy's passing and
the sundering of the parents,
sweetness and horror all there on the page,

and I want more, I pull a dozen books
down from the shelves
and careen crazily through them,
greedy for more minds, more lives.

Every paragraph seemed to sing,

every poem a shiver, people's picture
snapped in the moment of a lifetime,
and I felt no envy only joy.

My chest hurts, I step outside
and walk toward town.
The Zumbro River is frozen over,
but I hear water by the bridge.

The falls are tumbling brown
from the limestone table,
like a greasy comb of water
in winter. It is just starting

to snow again, and Rachel
is there, and takes my arm,
and we head home, middle-aged,
coughing frost in the silent air.

What We Want

We want the basics, but the basics are not enough.
Meat and bread are good, but we want more than that.

We want to know there will be meat when we need meat,
and we want nourishment than that.

We want there to be beauty in our lives,
beautiful things to see,
the thrill we feel at something perfect,
the first moment you know you are in love,
and nothing is improvable.

Even more we want allowance for not being beautiful.
How great if being the way we are,
imperfect, naked, ourselves, were OK.

We want the warmth and the light of the sun
on our faces.

We want the feeling of surprise,
when suddenly things are not what we expect,
the glory of our affairs leaping from their track.

We want the glint of recognition when we see
and know the child in one another, and step gingerly out to play.

We want company and laughter and that drunken feeling of
feeling,
closing our eyes and just feeling.

We want instructive journeys into our own hearts,
where we learn who we are and why we are
and understand our own struggles.

We want another chance
to tell people what we really meant.

We want to join hands with those we have hurt
or insulted and say we're sorry.

We want to stop being afraid of the dark,
and afraid of the light.

We want to welcome the alien and celebrate the other.

We want to tell the secrets
that have been choking us for years, blurt them out
where they can't hurt us any more.

We want explanations, we want to be shown,
with arrows and diagrams, why things happened
the way they happened
and how it is better this way.

We want to be gods but we will settle for angels,
we would settle to be ourselves at our best.

We want the feeling of winning just once
but completely, the victory that heals
the scars of a hundred beatings.

We want to be forgiven for the careless bullets
we pump into each other,
as if they were only words, words we saw coming
but didn't care enough to stop.

We want to die and be born and live,
and die and be born again.

We want to stop being bastards and bitches
and be the children we used to be, for whom it was enough
to be good.

We want to sit at the knees of those we treasure
and hear their stories into the night, applauding the best parts.

We want to see and taste
and hear and feel and touch.

We want the calm warmth of the sleeping body
banked against us.

We want to kiss and kiss and kiss.

We want to say thank you
a thousand thousand times.

More than anything we want to be known
by the stars, by name, by face.

Let them see us trembling
in momentary flesh, glad for the breath
that is in us.

Just a Joseph ¹⁶⁰

for Dick Konik of Vermilion, Ohio (1929-1992)

This man is not my father, the boy told friends.
He is just a friend of the family,
he helps us get from place to place
while I go about my business. But
when an awl slipped, and a cedar sliver
slid into the web of his palm like a spear,
the proxy stooped and stroked the wound,
and coaxed the bloodied splinter out,
and greased the hole with workman's balm.

160 The Brood (1992)

To the Young Poet Who Wished
To Know How to Do Better ¹⁶¹

Your haiku
are too long.

Late August 2009 ¹⁶²

River dispatches spirit as steam
evaporating
in the morning light

The fawns of spring
step into view
on dew-lipped grass

Bee doesn't know he
is unaerodynamic
and so he

bumbles along

Billboard 163

Mounted above a TV repair shop along Dale Street in Saint Paul
is a billboard with the immense face of a man on it,
thirty feet tall, as tall as a movie screen.

His tie is askew, his collar is wild, like a man who has been
running in his suit.

His coloring is all wrong, orange and blotchy red,
as if he spent hours in a tanning booth,
then guzzled down a fifth of cheap gin.

The man is perhaps 30, and he is holding a phone to his ear and
smiling,

but the receiver does not appear to be connected.

“I’m Steve Larson of Sunset Realty,” the sign says, “and I buy
homes for cash!”

He seems both innocent and crude, as if having the belief
that just seeing his huge face, faking a phone call,
grinning from high above the traffic,
will make us want to hand over our houses and give him the keys.

I imagine his pals clap him on the back for pulling off this stunt
but that even he knows, when he drives this way late at night,
When the traffic dies down, that he could not be nakeder
to the world,

promising cash in hand if people will only turn over
their lives to him,

than if that giant face were festooned on the moon,
agog at what is possible below.

Hot and Cold Running Good Friday 164

A cold warm day in April May
when the bulbs crouch, cowards
behind bolted doors, occasional showers
and occasions of sin dampen
the sidewalks and moisten the skin,
water flows as the torture twists
my grin to a grimace, my hands into fists.
How many times battered by road
I looked up and there was no veil
to mop my brow. Our father
who art in heaven, I love the Jew
who died for me though it is all
nonsense I know and April is a foolish,
cruelish month, and poems are litter,
cartwheeling creatures,
flyers, circulars, winging their way
beneath my feet and the stone rolls away.

McVeigh 165 *

If God made men to march to bugles
then who are we to stick nails in our ears?

We're here because we eat red meat
and we loved our country.

A proper plan will awaken the giant,
at this point nothing

could please me better than squeezing a trigger,
and every daycare center a target.

Right now we are already strong as hell,
two years from now we'll be legends.

165 Lucky You (1976)

* I wrote this in 1974, then retitled it for the Oklahoma City bombings of 1995.

Farewell Curtis Hotel 166

We had had a fight in October, 1969,
my California family and me,
and I grabbed a a shirt and my checkbook
with a few dollars in it from delivering
Fuller Brush for my dad that fall,
and hitchhiked to LAX, wrote out a check
and flew the red-eye into St. Paul.
And the limo driver listened to my tale
and dropped me off at the Curtis Hotel
where I shivered in my shirt by the revolving door
and waited by the ashtray stand for a friend
to come get me, while the first snow fell.

He finally came and took me home,
and told me I was on my own.
I got a job in a parts warehouse
and went to night school and did pretty well
and I got a good job, with a desk and a door,
and there met Rachel, after a while.
I used to take her Sunday mornings
to the brunches at the old hotel,
and feast on omelet and melon balls,
bouquets of roses and asphodel,
and the waiter kept our glasses full
of cheap champagne, and I would peel
a twenty from a roll of bills,
which I never begrudged at the Curtis Hotel.

We lost that job, but married anyhow.
We pledged our troth in a city park
and danced all day in a friend's front room,
but when it was time for the honeymoon,
we checked into the Curtis Hotel,
the only room we could afford,
a single window overlooking the mall,
but we slept in, switched off the bell,

166 Ballad of the Curtis Hotel (1992)

our only night in the Curtis Hotel.

Years later, my dad, no longer selling
door to door, had some interesting news to tell:
"Your mom and I were not doing so well,
we thought a trip together might be swell.
That's what's we have been meaning to tell
you: you were conceived in the Curtis Hotel."

I have this memory of when I was a child,
standing with my grandfather on the opposite shore
of the Mississippi in LaCrosse, and he pointed and said
Minnesota is just over there, and I repeated the word
and lingered on its power, and made a vow
to cross that river one day. So when the plane landed
years later and I stepped into the Curtis Hotel
I knew this was the place I would dwell.

When I saw it demolished on TV,
the cameras caught at the final moment
a window on the fourteenth floor slide up,
then shatter, as the building buckled
with the weight of the beds and bathtubs
of all those years, its bricks all shrugged
and its shoulders collapsed and went to hell.

And the people building the convention hall
on that site explained that no one was in Room 1410,
the crew had checked out every floor.
No homeless man could hide in a closet,
sure today was not the final day
(today is never the final day).
The opening window had no meaning,
it was no ancient honeymooner hollering No,
it was just an effect that a dying building feels.

The hum of death vibrating every sill,
so it throws up a window to let out a howl
and shout out the secrets of the Curtis Hotel,

and all the souls who sheltered there,
who slept, and wept, and shivered, and sighed,
and laughed, and loaded up their plates,
crawled into bed, and rose, and ate,
and tipped the doorman at the gate,
and drove away with no thought of farewell
to the spirits who stayed in the Curtis Hotel.



Hamsters 167

Several times I have opened an eye at night
certain someone was moving in the house,
but it was only the chrome wheel turning

Or we would be making love and hear the sound
of metal on metal from the children's room –
the ball in the drip bottle pushed and released.

The crunch of seed between pointed pearls,
the scurry and blink of prisoners.
In the cane, in the damp, in the moldy dark, they spin.

Nine Caregiver Tales*

from interviews with personal attendants

1

'The couple on Columbus Avenue sat down to eat ...
All they had on their plates was mac and cheese ...
So I stopped off at the Farmer's Market
And loaded up on greens and okra,
A chicken for frying, and some catfish too ...
You should have seen the looks on their faces
when they came to the door ...'

2

'Dora's stroke took away her speech ...
From that day on, not a word escaped her ...
But of all the friends I visited I felt calmest with her ...
I would talk and she communicated with her eyes ...
There was no embarrassment, and no misunderstanding her ...
You could tell she was entirely there, right there ...
From the light of thanks that shone from her.'

3

'Jake and Dora went for a walk around the block ...
And when they got back, their car was gone ...
The repo man had been watching them ...
It's funny, Jake said, we could have declared bankruptcy and kept
it all ...
But the catch is, bankruptcy costs \$1500 in Texas...
Hey, if we had \$1500, we wouldn't have had to declare
bankruptcy!'

4

* This series was written as part of my participation in a workshop by Stuart Pimsler Dance & Theater of Minneapolis. It was not commissioned – just stories I assembled from other caregivers' experiences. It was an issue of concern to me because I had cared, at different levels and in different times, for my sister Kathleen, my mother, and my daughter Daniele.

'This trailer was falling apart ...
There was a hole over the stove and animals were coming in...
The formica walls were peeling away ...
Their two young kids needed space to run, and not so many sharp
corners ...
I found them a new place ...
With a yard, and fence, and a place to plant flowers ...
Not always, but sometimes, well, every now and then ...
everything falls into place ...'

5

'Sometimes you hit a wall ...
Money is a wall ...
A few thousand dollars and all this misery would go away ...
But there's no way to get it, and the looks in people's faces ...
As if somehow, some way, there's a way to get through this ...
You would write them a check yourself, if you had it ...
But there's so many people in trouble ...
The pain goes on and on ...
That's when I break down and cry ...'

6

'Some people go into a funk when they can't walk any more...
Not Eliza...
She gunned that chair down the hall, bumping into people on
purpose...
Challenging them, blocking their progress ...
Wearing a bright red dress because she wasn't hiding from
anyone...
One day I pushed her around the room, like a waltz ...
And she said, 'This was what it was like. There was space ...
God, I loved to dance.'

7

'Abe played saxophone all his life...
Slinky and smooth, it was the only thing he loved ...
The stroke took away one hand, and this proud artist ...
Could now just fumble with the keys ...
But one time he played for me...
a simple version of 'Summertime, and the livin' is easy ...'
With closed eyes, tears running down his pursed lips.'

8

'The hardest part is when I have to move on ...
You become part of people's lives, part of their hopes...
Then the system says, Go help these other folks ...
Or you just burn out and have to start over ...
And the looks on their faces when you explain ...
And you know it is the last time you will see them ...
Because it's the dying time of year ...
And the feeling that rises up in you ...
That is part love and part shame ...
The hardest thing is saying goodbye.'

9

'It was the most peaceful death I ever saw...
One moment I was reading to Helen about the life to come ...
Then this elegant independent woman slipped away ...
Her sister called me later to say Helen had one last request ...
She asked me to dance, on her grave ...'

Cottonwood 168

In May the fluff begins to float.
It is the feather of the cottonwood
Mightiest tree rising up from the Mississip
And shooting into the atmosphere.
How can an airborne thing become
So mammoth a being?
Because it is still light in its wood.
This ribbed pillar is mostly air,
With skies of space between every particle
So even when it thumps its giant heart
It is already beginning to fall.

Cafe Bulletin Board 169

Valentines Day Puppies, \$300 for female, \$200 for males

Laz-E Boy Chair, royal blue leather, 1 week old, \$350

Their here – the 2004 Polaris snowmobiles!

Hi, I'm Eric, and I plow snow – call for free estimate

Truck for sale, low miles

God's Simple Plan for Salvation, take one

Guitar lessons by Steve

Explosive home based business – \$99 in = \$1000 out – we team build and every one gets paid

2 single Craftmatic beds with built-in massage and heated mattress cover, one never used

Dog houses for sale, single insulated \$95, double insulated \$135

Will haul for peace and justice

COMMENTARY: What I Think

I don't know where else to put this so I will just stick it here in the middle. Now might be a good time to visit the toilet, or check out the fine treats at our snack counter.

Sometimes I am asked, usually by a magazine editor trying to do an interesting layout, what my 'poetics' are. It is really this question: What do you think you are doing?

Why do you do something no one much likes? What good do you see coming from it?

This is what I say.

I say the world is a place that reveals itself to you. To the true devotee, it does so with scripture. But to the less than true, non-devotee, the world reveals itself in odd moments – synchronicities, head-scratchers, vivid dreaming, the dumbstruck occurrences that happen every day to us, and seem to be telling us something.

This is what I do with my writing. It is an extension of my everyday thoughts about everyday things. In each case I am a bit astonished at the things I see, and the thoughts that overtake me.

I write a lot, and am vulnerable to the charge of obsessive compulsiveness. But I seriously believe that I am standing in the path of these funny revelations, and it is my job, as a human being, to note that I saw them, or thought them.

Why does the world reveal itself. Because that is its point. It wants to be known. And so it abducts us, in these strange moments of beauty.

A poem is therefore a form of divine journaling. I like the idea that there is a holy spirit that wants us to know weird things, things that don't quite add up, unless we step out of our "reasonable selves," and see, with just a moment, with alien eyes.

And that's what I've been trying to do.

M.F.

Remainders 170

Copies of my poems went on sale at Odegard Books,
The precise word is remaindered,
Marked down from three ninety five to just the ninety five,
And it hit me that this gambit by the bookstore
Was just what people had been waiting for.

Sure, you expect people to hold back,
Especially at today's prices. Three ninety five is
A piece of change, no doubt about it,
And there must be people who thumb the book
And pat it with one hand as if weighing the
Poems against the expense, the expense against
The poems, take one step toward the cashier
And then fail in their purpose, put the book back
In the rack, and pick up a copy of American Poetry Review,
Beautiful things wonderfully said,
For under three dollars, a wonderful buy, instead.

But who could balk at ninety five cents,
Why, that's less than a dollar with a nickel left over,
You could buy the poems and have enough to
Handle the sales tax, nineteen for the poet and
One for the State of Minnesota and its beautiful
Forests and waterfowl.

[Actually, all nineteen don't go to the poet. I was
Promised a ten percent royalty, which meant forty cents
On the full price, and the fine print here says
When a book goes remainder there isn't really
Any royalty at all, but I don't care, I didn't
Write them for the forty cents, you see,
I wrote them for this feeling I'm having right now
Of breaking through, of getting out,
Of seeing the birds I'd stored in the box
Fly out of it, white wings fair
clapping the morning air.]

Ninety five cents for thirty five poems,
That's less than three pennies apiece. Here's one
About some weeds growing in sidewalk cracks,
So what, it's only six lines long but at three cents
Who's going to complain? Here's another,
A beautiful lyric, a love poem connecting
To the Italian futurist movement of the nineteen-teens,
It was published in a number of respected magazines,
For less than three cents you won't need a vacation tour
This year, just read the words and feel their awful power.

Or the final poem, I call it 'The Light, ' which was all
My life in sonnet length, how there were things
I thought I always wanted, but when I got them they were
Different, or I was unable to recognize them – such pathos
As would melt the stony heart, and I lay it all down
For you, vulnerable, small, the shattered clown,
The paper trembles with the grief of truth,

Because here it is, softcover renaissance,
And all it costs is three lousy cents.
My ear to the ground I can detect the build
Of momentum, people swearing off bad habits forever,
People afraid to look one another in the eye
Now looking and seeing the pain and love that had been there
All along, now reaching out, fingertips touching,
The sting of tears collecting in the corners
Of millions and thousands, the soft collapse
Of a hundred brittle barriers of reason and attitude
Finally available, the incandescent word
At prices the masses can afford.

Let us go now, you and I, to Odegards.
For life has many sales but few true bargains.
Let us take the silver coins and hand them to the person
And remember to ask for the receipt, if you're a poet
Your whole life is deductible.
Oh daughters of Homer gather round his knees

And hear him sing his saltstrong songs.
There are myriad of you there,
A speckled galaxy of brave little lights,
Fresh washed garments tucked under your knees,
Eager for instruction and keen for meaning,
He cannot see you but he hears you breathing.



When We Are Gone

When we are gone and the plates of the earth
have shrugged,
and the cupboards rattle and the rafters sift,
and the groaning household teeters on the brink
and the song of consciousness decays,
what calendar will cordon off its days?

When we are gone and the rub of reaching fills the world,
and root and branch and tongue and paw
all strain as one for what is just beyond,
sugar, sunshine, water, meat,
and the hummingbird suspended in the air,
what mind, what glance encapsulates it there?

When we are gone and the dust of our doing has flown
and there are no longer angels and no men,
And our home and our skin and our story of love
give way to hozannas of flies,
what spectators swarm the empty choir,
sockets twitching with surmise?

When we are gone and meaning loses meaning
though your molecules and my molecules
are plucked apart and strewn
across this raw unwitnessable scene
they are better for that blink of time,
forgotten in the giddy sprawl of green.

To a Woodpecker 171

I too have been banging my head
like a jackhammer of bone
on the trunk of a tree
till my thoughts rattle round
like Odysseus for home.
Will I pry apart cambium with my nose
and find grubs in the soft meat
or will I spend a lifetime
skullstruck up a pole
reiterating the error of my life?

171 Sunset Lake (1989)

Roads

Macadam, asphalt, blacktop, tar.
Roads will take you anywhere,
speeding through the countryside, every bend a mystery,
every unevenness a jolt into something not known.
Roads on islands are conflicted
because they do not get you anywhere really,
they are circular and apologetic about that.
Mountain roads turn cars into eagles,
breasting the current then streaking down,
every eyelid opened wide.
Shore roads and causeways
lick the water while the water licks them.
Frontage roads like zoo animals prowling
their perimeters, pining to be free.
The dead end road is indeed a death,
irreversible and to be avoided
until the time you wish not to return.
Expressways and beltways that traffic courses through
like blood through muscle, cars by the thousand,
every destination of economic significance.
City boulevards throw each car in the spotlight
announcing a major breakthrough, you.
Alleyways where cats trip by on tiptoes,
and the modest lane that guides us to the garage,
the squeaky brake that tells you you are home.

Kerouac's Will

"Nobody Owns Jack Kerouac" – Jack Shea

They are fighting over the poet's estate,
who gets the royalties, who owns the rights.

To manuscripts, diaries, thousands of letters
One will after another is thrown out in court

The family scrambles to sell off his stuff.
Johnny Depp paid \$15,000 for a trenchcoat.

Surprise of surprises, the bum on the road
is worth about \$20 million,

a man with \$91 in his checking account

at the moment of his death

Cosmetic Dentistry 172

First the bad news.

The teeth you now run your tongue over
will all be leaving your head,
like that woman with the four-million-year-old skull
whose canines were scattered like dice
near the jaw in the red dirt of Africa's Afar Rift,
because bite the dust is what teeth do.

My neighbor is a cosmetic dentist,
you can tell from the way he keeps his lawn
he is a proficient, too.
He knows teeth are designed to last a lifetime
provided your lifetime is short and brutish,
but his job is to extend the warranty,
painlessly, with amazing glue and diamond drills,
through the lengthy and lovely lives
so many enjoy today.

Jung says that an archetypal dream
is that we are standing over a sink
and our teeth fall out of our mouths
and clatter down the drain and we try
to catch them but they are gone.
Turns out it's a dream about mortality.

The good news is, it doesn't bother your dog
that he's going to lose everything,
including his canines, which you don't brush
though you know you should,
though you love your dog a lot
but it's kind of a bother to brush your dog's teeth
and why shouldn't his ivories
last the full fifteen years,
when all he eats is toasted soybeans.

And the dog never dreams that dream

172 The Rapture (2009)

of standing in the bathroom mirror
watching his mortality clank against porcelain
because he's a dog and they are spared that,
unlike you and maybe unlike the Ardipithecus lady
if people were already starting to dream about teeth
four million years ago in Ethiopia.
Why are we the ones haunted
the way my poor neighbor the dentist is,
everything has to be just the right way,
on his knees in the grass on Saturday mornings in June,
exhaust seething from the chainsaw in his hands,
grinding away at the imperfect stump.

Why a Poem and Not Prose?

I acknowledge from the outset
you lose 99% of readers
because they hate it this way

We live in prose, we toil in prose,
we wish we could spend every minute in prose
because it's manageable and workmanlike

and reasonable,
you can measure yourself against it
hell you can even write it,

Whereas poetry raises so many doubts,
it is a temptation to lay it on thick
and getting vacuumed up your own butthole

Sometimes a shark is taking bites of you
your chum is bleeding into the ocean around you
a poem allows it, and paragraphs don't

Or we awaken from a terror dream
and there is God by the maple bureau
and he's clicking his mandibles

And sometimes you just need
to stuff a hummingbird
into a milkweed pod

and for that a milkweed pod is ideal

Truth Never Frightens

Based on a poem by Catherine of Siena (1347-1380). I realized some years after I made this that it is plagiarized from a shorter poem by Daniel Ladinsky. Apologies and honor to him, but I still like the extended version.

I remember once walking out in the winter
to greet our father as he returned from work.
He was a little late that night
and I waited by the corner near our house

The cold can enliven thanks, you know.
Thus my wool coat became a sacred robe ...
How happy I felt to be alive that night.

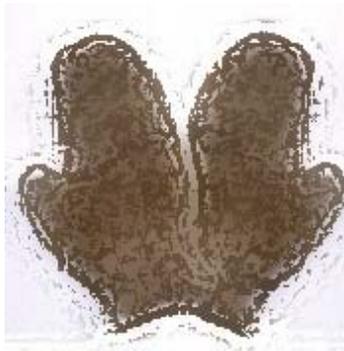
I waited there in a world of all the things I loved,
the smell of good food,
the quiet gleam of the street lamps,
smoke curling from every chimney,
the candles burning so hopefully in our windows
as if all were waiting for some important arrival.
And the snow,
the holy and immaculate snow.

It fills my heart with thankfulness.
It makes me think that angels feasted as I did that night
on the truth of our existence,
that God keeps saying to us, like the most loving father:
"Have more of what I made for you.
Have more. Have more!"

I saw him coming, our father
I saw him coming with arms outstretched.
We ran to meet each other
and he lifted me as he so often had –
twirled me through the air,
his hands beneath my arms,
holding me aloft.

And you know this is the nature of truth.

This is how truth behaves
Truth never frightens, it seeks only to love us
It lifts us high and lets us fly
Like birds in formation on the starriest night
It lifts us up and lets us know
How loved we are by God.



Bad Poem

There is the sickening moment
when you realize he isn't going
to pull out of this
and the black smoke pours
from the manifold,
and the pilot heads into
the horizon
and it would be sad except
he had it coming
and this is how nature
scrubs itself.

Geese 174

How virtuous they seem
squabbling on Marydale Pond,
pointing in every direction, leaderless,
recuperating from the hard day's flight.

They are the most recent crew
to drop into St. Paul to rest up,
judging from the goose crap squirted
like chatreuse toothpaste on the path.

Their virtue is their honking courage
attempting a 1400-mile flight
from Winnipeg to Padre Island
across every junkyard, strip mine and mall.

Not one of them's a drama queen,
calling attention to the epicness underway
or the sisters who fell to hunters' guns
or the brothers took sick and veered out of formation,

Not for them to crab about nothing,
They shut their beaks and kept flapping.

Nighttime at the Christian Retreat 175

The men who have been praying all day
Lay down their souls like cufflinks to the Lord.
And in a while the snoring starts, first in one cot,
Then in another, and soon each man
Is making his offering of oxygen.
There are thirty men under this roof
And not one is a drinker any more but maybe
We were all dropped on our faces as babies
Or maybe we have a greater than average population
Of former boxers, noses broken by a left jab,
Gladiators laid out on the Coliseum floor
gasping through a spatter of blood.
And the sum is like a song played on a rank of snouts
Like a choir of hogs assembled in crates,
Grunting and rooting and squealing for God.
Where the intake is a truck wheezing up a steep hill
And low gear holds the runaway in check
For if they leave the road they have set out on
They will backslide and their exertions will have failed.
Up a hill, down a hill, the night is an oscilloscope
Of panting crescendos and snorting diminuendos
On a pneumatic organ inflated by breath.
The roof draws in, the roof expands,
The roof heaves up, the roof subsides,
Like the ribs of a whale with thirty men inside
Detoured from their journey to Nineveh.
And the night is the irreplaceable pearl
That we beat the shrubs by our houses to find
That we turn out every cushion, flip over every rug,
That we pry up the hardwood of our hearts to locate
But it is not there until we surrender,

175 Moab (2005)

Like the flushed faces of boys on their pillows
From the exertion of long days of play,
Like the din of a great brass gong, hung from a rope,
Fashioned by the hammering
Of a thousand earnest craftsmen,
Or the groan of a lamasery, chanting like smoke
High up on a dream Himalaya.



Knock on Wood

So a tree becomes a stump
and the microbes burrow in
until it is all lacework
a filigree of matter.

The world that seems solid
is full of holes,
holes between pores
and holes between cells,
holes between the molecules,
atoms and particles.

There are oceans of space within and between.
You could say we live in space.

I'm not really here,
I'm just saying I am.

The Idea of a Boat

Whoever came up with the idea of a boat
was rowing against intuition.

The water, which seeks to envelope us
and fill our lungs with itself
and drag us down to its embrace
could be contradicted
with a thin membrane,
a leaf, a log, a raft, a door
and we bound out on the breast of death
like anybody's business.

Anteater

He's a tough negotiator.
He doesn't just eat you,
he eats your wife
and he eats your children
and he eats your mother
and he eats your cousins
and he eats your insurance agent
he eats everyone you know.
He eats your whole city
then tucks the last ant in the side of his maw
and says
I'm sorry,
I can't help it
I was made this way,

I require large numbers of ants to survive.

If You Like Poetry

There probably something wrong with you.
You have an appetite for grandiosity,
or inability to deal with everyday reality
your sense of self has been splintered
so you dwell in solipsistic space.
Perhaps you are afraid of confrontation
and so you seek retribution on the page.
Or your anger at injustice
has taken you to a place where
you need to smolder by yourself,
Or your attention span is not what it might be –
isn't that a spider on your sweater?

Abused Mom

Woman at the crosswalk
daughter in her hand,
rushing to catch the school bus.

The purple eye is humiliating.
How can you hide it
when everyone knows its meaning.

I have walked into a dozen doors
and never made
a fistmark on my face.

Tall despite your wound
your hand cups your little girl's
as you venture into traffic.

We Irish

It is said we hate the body
and it's true.

It is said we punish
with silence
and we do.

Slow to anger, slow to judge,
good thing we never
hold a grudge.

It is said we have the sweetest songs
since Rosie fingered Dawn
but then we have our
downside, too.

Bath 176

It has been years since you drew one
And now you descend into mercury again

The warmth in the extremities
As if heat rays shot out of you

The drip of the hot faucet
maintaining constant temperature

There are your feet and toes
Kept apart from you for so long

Lined up like penitents on the tile
And now you are reunited

They are the faces of what you know
And you embrace their wrinkled selves

Hello matched team whose
Intelligence is plodding

Did you remember to let out a squirt
It's wrong, but where is the harm

Then you lay back and immersed
The brain was haloed by rushing fish

One stream entering another
On their journey to the sea

The Rapture 177

Walking with Rachel,
We detect a fragrance
So sweet and so intense

Like honey, lilac and swirled violets
We look at one another
With a look of deepest longing

Until we step into a clearing
And see the turquoise
plastic Port O Potty.



It Laid Down Its Life¹⁷⁸

You wonder if it's true
the thing that people say

that this selfish thing
dozing on its throne

would lay its life
down for you.

Conjure scenarios –
the attacker on the street,

the bullet headed for your heart,
the soul leaping into the gap

The music swells
and out come the hankies

but the truth is
more homely

the soul laid down its
life for you

the moment that you met

178 DOG As a Metaphor for the Soul (2008)

The Soul Thinks

You Belong to It ¹⁷⁹

It's got it all backward,
that you are an appendage to it,
and not the other way around.

But it's absurd you say,
How can you be in charge?
I'm the practical one, I open the doors.

But it explains how it can be so demanding.
Of course it bellows when you are gone.
Because that is not what it wants.

Of course it goes out of its mind when you leave.
Why would you ever want to leave,
how could you?

And all this time you thought you were caring for it
and a thin leash connected you,
looped around your head.

179 DOG As a Metaphor for the Soul (2008)

When the Soul Is Young **It Knows Everything** ¹⁸⁰

A thousand exclamation points embedded in the brain
This will happen and this and this, then this
And the world steps back because a soul is in its bliss
And only a troll would interrupt with truth
Which after all is the truth of disappointment
And don't you do what I have done
And let me spare you the greater pain
By placing this in the secret space between your ribs
O soul your burst of energy is a miracle to witness
It is testimony to every impossible thing
And one never knows whether it is one's job
To join hands in ring-a-rosie with you
Or pillow it to sleep

180 DOG As a Metaphor for the Soul (2008)

Disavowal

Be wary of poems that mount the pedestal
Brandishing bright words, or better still
stand guard and prick up your ears.
A deeper peace will take a thousand years.

Springtime 181

When the floodwater rises
it drapes the twigs and stems
with the leaves and gunk stirred up.

Then when it recedes the muck
clings to the branches
in the shape of the water's drift.

The bushes seem populated with
puppets and dolls
with papier-maché blouses

and bunched up clothes.
And when the breeze comes through
it lifts up their skirts and they dance.

Prayer in Defiance of Grief 182 *

How can you kill what cannot be killed?
Why weep for those who have been taken?

Why furnish ammunition to the enemy
Who hammers jewels from your tears?

Who am I to say, 'This is the end!'
When I am the world's ignoramus.

I can't outsmart the equity markets
But I second-guess my molecules?

I have made a list of every known sadness
And set it ablaze on a paper plate.

Let others twist their hankies at night.
I am free of all that forever.

182 You (2002)

* 'You' is a book about pursuing the spirit – hymns of joy, mostly. If you hate theistic things, you will want to skip these.

Prayer for Resilience 183

As the mountain hungers to be made flat
So I burn for your salvation.

Help me to forgive the airplanes
strafing me on the skyscraper.

The centipedes in the pillowcase
know not what they do.

Spread open my chest with a spring-clamp
And let my heartbeat keep my time.

These trembling hands want work.
These clapping lips want song.

To you I lift a styrofoam cup.
Pile on dear God, pile on!

Prayer for Foolishness 184

God make me an idiot
Oblivious to sense.

I don't want to care
About things that don't matter.

Gibberish is speech enough
From now on poetry is touch.

Burn all books in an act of faith
Gag all speculative breath

Steer my learned friends away
Let me be with you this day.

Cromwell Crossing

In the bright of morning the whistle blasts a dozen times.
It is hard to stop a hundred plus cars
for a Ford Tempo straddling the tracks
and a drunk dozing at the wheel.

The particular machine bearing down on us
is loaded down with pellets from the range,
it's the latest edition, with sensors and IPs
and automatic pilots,
and that electric signal carries.

Perhaps there was an accident here
with a busload of kids,
twenty years before,
or perhaps rush hour,
even in a tiny town of 127 folks,
is a good time to be safe.
Either way they have to blow that damn
thing every morning now at 7 am,
no matter who's still sleeping.

Beauty and Wisdom

there is a well in the iris
and everything falls in

and no man is immune
from this characteristic error

beauty looks like wisdom
because the eyes are amazing

something that wonderful
must see something

Prayer for the Reordering of History 185

If we went by the papers
The world'd be burned to a crisp.
Then where did all the beauty come from?
And whence that pitchfork, hanging in the air?

It's so easy to get sidetracked
Over pogroms and massacres.
Did you order all that blood for yourself
Or did our own certainty require it?

The clang of armies was our idea.
All you ever offered was love.
And now it is our charming defiance
That throws that in your face.

Help us to identify and ignore
All propaganda.
Better to be blind as a mole than to see
Disingenuously.

Writers

Writers start out all right
they pay attention to things and deliver reports
on the way things are, it is a useful function
they perform

but then something happens

someone will say, you know, this is interesting,
and you can see it go bad
like a banana going brown
they enjoy the attention and want more
and tell themselves I could create lots of these reports,
they're not that hard to do
now that I know how to do it

and then they want readers
and they they want comments
and then they want praise
and then they want praise
bulging out of the faucet
night and day like an endless drip.

until they are no longer reporters
but debutants on a featherbed
chins in their hands and their feet
wagging behind them

tell me more about myself
tell me more
and they're not working
for you any more

you say everyone needs encouragement
it's not true
encouraging only encourages them

Prayer for Poets 186

Let a thing be what we say it is.
If a donkey is eating corn
let the donkey not be an allegory
nor the corn a corn byproduct.

Let us not despise readers
for not getting us
when we did nothing to let them in,
and everything to keep them out.

Let every offering be a gift,
first from you and then from us.
Let 'Let this serve you well'
be both credo and manifesto.

Do not let us fall down
the well of our awareness.
Neither let us feel special
Just because we hear music.

Lead us not into obscurity,
and deliver us from brilliance.
For thine is the poem
forever amen.

Stooping to Pick Up a Pill

that rolled onto the floor
and under the kitchen table

I bend at the back, no good
I get down on my bony knees

but my shoulder is in the way
and my neck starts to strain

I get all the way down
and duck my head under

till I hear myself wheeze
and the heart begins to thump

and the big vein pulses
and the follicles weep

then there is the pink pearl
bearded with bunny dust

I hold this statin eyelet
between two fingers like a host

and think this would be
a silly way to die

The Lazarus Cheese 187

Written on a 2008 trip to France.

“We milk the sheep
And stir the milk
And when it hardens
Place it in the cave.

“The fungi are drawn
To dark moisture, and swarm
over the great white wheels, and cover
Them with a leathery skin.

“But the cheese is so warm
It radiates its sunshine
Deep in the darkness
And the fungi seep into the light.

“Then the spiders descend
And they are hungry for the fruit.
They lay their eggs around the wheel
Like a drapery to protect it.

“After five years we remember
There is cheese down there
Deep within the cave
And we fetch it wrapped in cloth.

“It is like a monster made of monsters
And we cut it open and it breathes
From the depths it gasps
And exudes its bouquet.”

187 Cartes Postales (2008)

“But it is so sweet,” I say,
“So delicious!”
“Yes, but for five black years
It was death!”



The Monster

arises at 6 am daily,
commences abominations

everywhere he goes
he shits on beauty

and not just a little, it is
remarkable how it disperses

an oscillating propeller fans
the shit till it is everywhere

and if you ask him
what he thinks he is doing

he will say, I honor it
with my attention and my stink

he is drawn to beauty
but then must soil it

he wants to be close to it
to climb into its body

it is the very intimacy
that is so unnerving

and after a while things
are not so beautiful

then the monster moves on,
and he takes the family with him

and all of them glad
to lie down among flowers

Patty Canney ¹⁸⁸

Her paintings are light
and colorful, only a woman
could or would portray these
languid hesitations –

a visitor in a gallery leaning into
an oil,
a male dancer during break, chest out,
unable not to strike a pose,
a dress dummy in a window,
headless yet still pretty.

In each case there is something beautiful and timeless,
and at the same instant diminutive,
a sigh of human exasperation.

Children dripping ice cream
into dappled hands,
a man slouched in a chair in an atrium
biding more time than he wishes.
A garment hanging on a nail,
awaiting the impartation of flesh.

It is an everyday world of grace and
impatience,
One we bustle through every day,
hands in pockets and eyeballs rolling,
forgetting we are art.

188 The Rapture (2009)

Soul 189 *

like the hart that panteth for the brook
you letteth me love you, thanks
for not dying and taking me with

it is not always so bright
and bumptious as a child
or a wagging tail knocking

the dish from the coffee table
or walking in and tracking up the carpet
there is a tendency to underestimate

how lucky you are because it is there
outside your window there its peep
among the crickets and frogs

let it in, let it sleep at your feet
like it likes to
though departing occasionally

it circles the rug
with a yawn

189DOG As a Metaphor for the Soul (2008)

- * I must explain a series of poems titled *DOG As a Metaphor for the Soul*. It began as a conceit: that dogs show us what our souls are like, something very different from the usual spiritual literature ... and also, that the dog is a kind of soul, like a guardian angel. The conceit waxes and wanes in these poems, and I should have done more to make these lyrics clearer to people.

The Blind 190

We resented the lucky who were born to success
Who thought this was all there ever was

But we don't know if they're really lucky
Or if they're just simple and that's their loss

We hated the people who enjoyed causing hurt
And the clever for making us feel ashamed

Those who wouldn't tell us what they knew
Who stood and photographed our tears

But their cleverness was their punishment
Eventually the clever feel hollow too

And it is human to slow down and stare
At the splash of blood on the bottom stair

We resented our brothers for casting us down
Yet we know our brothers would die for us

We ran from our moms and we hid in the world
But they wanted us to be happy and live

Our dads did not think us worth staying with
But those fathers turn on rotisserie spikes

We cried because our children were no better than us
But they were drawn from our own confused blood

We turned on God because he turned on us
Or so we thought because we felt so alone

We prayed the light would dwindle to a dot
But awoke to find ourselves home

190 This poem began as a 5th step document ... a list of resentments that lay at the root of addiction and unhappiness. But they seemed to have little lessons embedded in them, and I wandered from the 5th-step format to this.

Drunken Houseguest

Rakhan weaves his promise with a finger
I want to learn English the best Mister Mike

I want to studying every day
All the people being speaking the best

All my families believe in my success
Because that is my name, I am the cornerstone

I am not supposed to alcohol I know
But America, well, America no problem

And the woman in the bank with bare knees
Is not prostitute, she is made to be that way

One day I tell my family everybody listen
Mister Mike is most excellent teacher

Old Man Mountain Climbing *

The old man begged not to begin the ascent,
but we looped a rope around his head and dragged him up,
gasping.

Oh, don't be so negative we called back to him, staggering
And admit it, you need exercise, use it or lose it!

Halfway up he collapsed on the rocks, his eyes rolling
bloodshot red. Come on, old feller, we tugged at the rope,

I must admit he did his level best, on those shaky pins wobbling
His breath wheezing out like an asthmatic accordion

And when we dropped him off at his place,
we winked to each other

You know he's going to have a good sleep now!

* Again, I must be writing late at night with no regard for the reader. I called my dog "Old Man," and he was indeed old at the writing of this poem. But he still liked to accompany me on walks. As he huffed and puffed, I thought, "What if we treated actual old men like this?" I have never treated a senior in this manner.

Alien Abduction 191 *

You were innocent, you shared
The prejudices that connected us
Like prayer, and the world held firm
Behind its insipid certainties.

Now you have nothing to cling to,
You stopped making sense to people
And the ones who lifted you up
left you there without explanation.

How is a man to live like that
Except muttering and on his knees
Hanging one's head in the shivering corn
And living with an unreasonable truth.

191 Moab (2005)

* Again, I am guilty of using one metaphor – abduction by space aliens – to show what it is like to become convicted on an idea that is not popular with other people. You don't want to believe it – but your faith requires it.

Prayer at Planting Time ¹⁹²

The hardest lesson of the sinner
Is that all is in you, and nothing in him.
Why are we given these garrulous minds
If the end-challenge is only to submit?

God take away my anguish
By taking away everything.
I cannot save my life,
I cannot save the things I love.

Plant this wisdom into me,
Drill deep and release the bulb
That will bubble out of the ground like iris
After every dry season.

The Gift

I am trying to form a syllogism
but I can't turn the corner on it.

It begins with enormous loss
that crashes you to the ground.

It takes months to dare to think
that the loss is some kind of gift

But what is that gift exactly –
authority on the topic of pain?

What good is it to be an expert
on knowledge no one wants?

What sort of gift is tears and who
will form a line to drink them?

Fishflies 193

They probably have some other name where you are,
These clouds of angels ululating in the heat.
Harmless as flying shrimp, they neither bite nor itch
Yet they fill the heated sky with their bent translucent twigs,
Ecstatic to be together for a day before they die,
The endless day that extracts everything from them,
As if life were only about them and their rollicking hour in the
sun.
They mass at your screen door like a theater on fire
Turned back by a locked emergency exit, they perish in your car
grill
Bodies packed so deep that the fan blade
Scarcely cranks against the clog, and
Robustly constructed spider webs collapse from the weight
Of so much happiness. They are an army of Egyptians
Spun down in chariots to the sea floor,
They are the Superbowl crowd with the bomb in the stadium
ticking,
They are the communion of saints strewing palms
In the path of the new king proclaimed.
They are put in play not for any reason that benefits them
But because God made a covenant with the pickerel and gar
Saying the sign to my chosen will be the feast I visit upon you
In the first week of August, last days of July,
Eat this candy that I scatter on the waters
Till your gills no longer pulse and your stomach wants to split.
And so it will go, fish eating fly and man broiling fish
In a coating of garlic and crumb, each species imagining itself
special
Like a chain of being leading straightway to heaven.

My Mom 194

Delivering her eulogy,
I wanted to make it sweet,
The memories of a boy's mom
Across a long lifetime.

I rode beside her four times
In our old blue Plymouth
To the drivers license testing place
Along the gorge in Berea, Ohio.

I wanted to marry my mother then
And buy her a new Chevrolet
In two colors, red and cream
And make her smile again.

She was the oldest of six Irish kids
Raised poor on a Michigan farm,
Determined to make it out of there,
Sprout wings and split that place.

But she married a selfish man
And gave birth to a sick little girl
Who lived to be sixteen and after
Having her teeth pulled out, died.

There was no escaping after that
And no discussing the loss with her.
We continued to have get-togethers
In the big back yard, and the pictures

Show her smiling, but not really.
Only me and my brothers knew
How broken she was inside,
And how angry she was at the switch.

She liked to chat but she never laughed.

She liked to read but she didn't learn.
She loved her sons like gilded icons
But one by one she drove them all away.

For thirty five years she had diabetes.
Injections, blurred vision, black feet.
A husband died, a flood swept through,
Her heart attacks took away her home.

She spent her last year in my house,
Not happily. But I got to better
Understand her attachment to the past,
And her odd way of loving us.

So when the end to her suffering came
In a hospital room in Kentucky
And the doctors tried to yank her back,
And they called out the all-clear

I see her 49 Plymouth again
Splintering the guardrail by the gorge
Pedal to the metal, car over the cliff
She is rolling her eyes one last time

From the electricity ripping through
Her shredded circuitry, oh what
Can you do to me, I hear her demanding,
That you have not already done?

Living Without Friends 195 *

You told yourself you could do this without them
If you had their help it would undo the purpose
Recused yourself from the argument at hand
And folded into quietness there

You proceeded to suffer for a time
At your hunger and your loneliness
At the nothing there that swallowed you like a bug
And weeping nights from leaving them behind

You shut up like a foreclosed house
So never told a lie to those you loved
And never craved attention like a clown
So never disappointed or betrayed

So performed worthy work and set it
As an offering on the shelf of the world
So it was what it wanted to be
Clean and honest as a plank

Now when you think of them
It is no longer as temptation
Or the music of their laughter
Or the grasp of their embrace

But of the goodwill they bore you
Like a promise you would never meet again
Yet carry one another by the heart
Like a lantern that never goes out

195 Moab (2005)

* Around the year 2000 I noticed that I had fewer friends than before. People were dying, moving away, sometimes falling away, and not being replaced as in earlier times. So I wrote about this as if it were a virtue to be cherished – friendlessness. I don't think it's very persuasive,.

The Soul Is Judge and Doctor 196

The soul believes
it is sufficient
to itself

thus licks
and licks
the anxious wound

thus flesh
becomes glue
and soul laid bare

it needs a bandage
or the collar
of a clown

it hurts to see
it exposed
to every passing fly

never mind
how clean
they say it is

it needs the
correction

of another opinion

To His Missus Returned from the Sea*

First night she sleeps her back to me
like a semaphore signal

This vessel at anchor at last

I say missus, and that
stands for mistress,

and all that was lost in the elision

It is like master except thoroughly admiral:
"The mastress set sail on a plunging mattress"

Upright, midnight, recondite

Seamen hang listless in the rigging
Whitebacks stroke in the dinghy

Heaving their spume upon the sea

Lesser men wince because the captain is voluble:
How can you get a word in?

When edgewise is the most delicious way

Resting her harpoon against the wall
she slips inside the stiffened sheets:

Regina! my Queequeg! my queen!

* In 2008 my wife Rachel began making 4-7 week trips to the Arctic Circle to work as a doctor in Native Alaskan villages. My wife is an adventuress in her heart, and I am more of a homebody. These visits continue today, throughout all the difficulties we have been through. Nevertheless, I was able to write one funny poem about her comings and goings.

The Stink 197

Does not understand
it is the problem

Brothers, sisters
where are you going?

Renunciation 198

I break with St. Paul
and the one-way
Irish streets

And join with Patrick
and the Christ whose blood
veins every leaf

Step Up Some Other God

Step up some other God
Get in the running
Don't be like the first guy
Be gracious and cunning

Don't be one of
The original troupe
We need fresh flavor
to enliven the soup

New visions, new faces
W need a new deck
with a set of
new aces

I want a God who
Allows me to to think
A God who allows me
To buy Him a drink

A God who doesn't
Run out of gas
A God who's not
A pain in the ass

Let's get a God
Indifferent to fashion
And send the other guy
Packing

The Master's Hand 199

He underestimates its importance,
the touch of him on the skull
the patting and the scratch.

But he can be so blase
with that effortless speaking
which tumbles out like silk

Whereas I am a dumb angel
braying and bawling
the uncomprehending hark

How is it he does not know
how beautiful he is
the endless kisses I wipe him with

When he and I are one
it is as if I could live forever
as famous as the night

He is the running rabbit of peace
When his heart beats
my own beats twice

The Soul Doesn't Know

If It's Dying 200

and has no anxiety on that account.
If you were to say to it,
What if you were to lose everything you have,
life, pleasure, fulfillment,
it might let out a skull-cracking yawn.

Nothing we say makes sense to it
yet it tolerates us and the delusion
we call the unarguable truth,
but it doesn't call anything anything,
which is the rudest denial of all.

It doesn't care the way we care
Yet when the soul is within reach
it peers into us like a face from beyond
not stupid like it usually is
but knowing beyond all that we know

And it says I kiss you and I greet you
from the deepest dark of earth
where things that were together forever
break into the crumbs of what they are
and the whole is ever while

Desalinization ²⁰¹

As water became more scarce
we turned to our tears as a source

Suction cups hooked up to the eyes
Captured the precious liquid

Hand-held pumps converted them
to tapwater, ready to go

And the salt and the glycerine residue
were stored in underground casks

Nonstop grieving was encouraged
as an alternative to military service

Highway accidents skyrocketed
because it was so hard to see

But even that was not enough
to irrigate farm fields and

Planners looked for another source
And gathered by the ocean

And all agreed by the disagreeable taste
People have been weeping a long time

201 Desalinization (2010)

Dukkha

in Buddhism, the inevitability of suffering

Some folks have to live in shit
Others live next door to it

No escape and if there is
The 'suffering of no suffering' is his

The pain of unfeeling, not being at all
A cavity that swallows the soul

So do not envy the next guy's grass
Everyone gets it up the ass

Against Nature

No thing ever tried
because things do not intend
They do, but they do not on purpose

No thing ever cried
they lack the ducts to do it

No thing showed courage
at least not of the thinking sort
their boldness is close to stupidity

This is not to cheat creatures
This is not to undermine them
or their difficult journeys

But it is to say that it is us
that makes them beautiful

They need our eyes to be seen
our voices to speak
our souls to put souls in them

If there is a spirit in the forest
it is because
we breathed it there

If there is beauty in
the woodrose
we fashioned it with our eyes

If there is purity here
it's in a dream our
hearts have dreamed

We reward the industry
and the valor

and the grit
we see it
with our respect

We were the witnesses
we made the falling tree
make the crash

We were the suffering
and the affection
and the joy

Do not look for virtue
in the little ones
in the humble ones
unlikely as it seems
it is all in us

And there is our
frightening
responsibility

Other Women

How you must wonder
what the man is really like

The delight of him so human,
so stirring to the breast

He seems to have a sense
of their experience

To be near to such a one
so ripe with understanding

He is the one they didn't wait for
all those hurried years

He is the one who feels
the lining of their hearts

He is no great lover
but who cares about that

They hunger for instruction
And he has armloads written

They hope for the moment
when the iris flutters out

And the plumed figure struts
and the speckled flank may thrash

On the barbed hook
of an upraised eyebrow

Boy Pee ²⁰²

I waited outside the Port a Potty
for the 7-year-old boy
to finish
and when I went in,
there was pee everywhere.

It was like London
in 1940.
He had to point himself
in 360 degrees.
All was devastated.

I know that boys have
a powerful stream
but they are so close to the seat,
surely they could do
better than they do.

Or maybe this is something
they do on purpose.
Powerless in the greater world
they let loose their stream
behind the pulled latch.

And I daub the area with
toilet paper and gingerly
lower myself onto the damp,
like a sad clown
making way for the next act.

202 The Rapture (2009)

The Soul Is Annoyed By Your Fidgeting ²⁰³

It confronts you saying
Haven't you learned anything
from all our time together?

What do we do,
we snuffle about
and when we grow tired we nap.

It's a simple business really
to love and be loved
but to do it you must cut out the agitation

Turn off the radio, take
A long breath, tell yourself
to stop telling yourself things

Why listen to the chattering monkey
when it is what brought you
to this place

Let it go, say byebye,
Assist the clown climbing into the car
And drive away dragging cans

Obligations are bobbling away
like depleted chrysanthemums
all that remains is to

shut up and sing

203 DOG As a Metaphor for the Soul (2008)

Butts

get thrown from moving cars,
flicked from cricket fingers,
dumped out of ashtrays
ground under shoe tips

rains wash them into gulleys
then into the storm sewer
then headlong like the deer
departed out into the river.

beneath the Lake Street Bridge
is a sandbar of cigarette butts
millions jammed together like lumber
a beaver dam of paper and micronite

a cigarette is a valentine
you send yourself that says die
you worthless fuck
it is all that you deserve

it is target practice for the soul
each squeeze of the trigger
steadies the hand and
locates the crosshairs

a way to flip God the bird
and tell others not to hate you
because that would be redundant
you will save them all the trouble

the sandbar just below the bridge
grows like a stockpile
of spent shells, each one
etched with its owner's initials

Vicissitudes

they swell and empty with a
blomp like a sail in sun

always there as an alibi
whenever a mission is scrubbed

making more sense plural than
singular because they just do

Toggle

Everything we know suggests decline.
Pebbles tumble down mountains.
The whale lies gasping on the sand.
My undying love for you fades.

It is a wind-down world, and we place
a chair under every doorknob
to slow down the entropy, to hinder
the dying programmed into each cell.

But what if there were a toggle switch
located on the side of the box,
which flicking winds us up instead of down?
Play with it yourself and see.

Down, we slip into death and depression.
Flick up, the sun lights up the tomb.
Instead of draining we recharge,
Instead of dying we stand erect.

Diving backwards from pool to board,
Hearts quickening, love bounding,
The need to race to conclusions dwindling
because we were not in the hurry we thought.

Is There NASCAR in Heaven?

There surely must be
because of the glory
But obviously not the advertisements
They will not be selling Winston and
Kool 100s there
The afterlife is noncommercial
though the cigarettes are free

And instead of cars
which depend on resistance
we will have something looser,
I am thinking of songcars
You just sing and off you go
There's no burning rubber in heaven
no needle teetering on the red

And the guy at the loudspeaker
Is also the guy with the checkered flag
He's also the clown
with the multicolored wig
And up in the stands throwing down
Crackerjack that's him,
and slapping the mustard stain
on his thigh,
him too

And we will not race in a loop anymore
and not against one another
But with one another like colts at play
and everywhere and in every way
Its going to be terrific, you'll see

And instead of celebrity drivers
like Richard and A.J.
we will all be sitting at the wheel.
like movie stars in our astronaut suits
and the bugs on our teeth don't even die
they brush themselves off
and fly away

The Jeffers Petroglyphs

Here the tomahawk made
Red scratches on granite
It could almost have been
The glacier signing its name.
The drawings need no footnoting
They are adequate for the ages
Every artist thinks
His doings are important.
But here a hunter hung
His belt among the stars

Stubbornness 204

is a kind of beauty
in some, when there is fire
in the face that would burn up
the world which is the price
it pays for having you
in it and it is unreasonable
and it is doomed still you
cannot look away from
the power of that longing,
kicking and willful like
a young colt in spring

God Must Love Crazy People 205

He made so many of us
When we shout to ourselves
on a busy mile and not
into a cellphone
he must smile

When we fabricate arguments out of air
and become paranoid
with ridiculous fears,
a sensible person starts bleeding from the ears
and He daubs his eyes with joy

When we miss the rent because
all our money is spent
on a Krazy Kat clock with ping pong eyes
it constitutes
divine surprise

as if this was what
the world He made
out of mud is really for –
the looks on our pussies
are priceless

When we weep ourselves to sleep
because we can't seem to change
and we drive the people we love
onto barstools, saying

it matters, it is fulfilling,
it is the indivisible element,
it is the purpose of
the entire experiment

God must love the crazy people
or why would He make us

such as these,
impossible to put up with
unhealable as disease

He loves us because
we remind him of Him,
before the before, in-
comprehensible
to His core

To the Soul Every Day Is the Sabbath ²⁰⁶

No toil shall undo it
neither on Monday nor on Tuesday.
No task can distract it from its purposes
of a Wednesday or a Thursday.
It keeps Friday holy
and takes Saturday off
and on the seventh day it rests
just like all the other ones.
The loss for the workworld
is a gain for the sofa,
just gentle praying
that sounds like snoring.

The Soul Followeth Its Nose ²⁰⁷

Where we would think a problem through,
pausing till deep furrows sprout,
our friend shuffles along,
hardly thinking but inhaling in the most
considerate way.

And what it ponders rises from the earth
and bobbing in on every freshet
one may wonder what becomes
of all this research, what application
it leads to but what is
and must remain a mystery
to us finds satisfaction
in the breathing being
which knows, knows, knows
the path it trods because
it goes and thus goeth
to God.

It Likes to Roll **In Unspeakable Things** ²⁰⁸

the holier it is the more drawn
it is to deer crap and tuna fish

oh sponge me in nard
like the bride at a funeral

because sometimes a soul
needs to dive deep down

where the muck and crepuscence
put the anus on all of us

and the supercomputer
investigates the turd

to the maw and the paw
extend every dignity

but the flesh of the dead
is the meat of this world

We Think

we invented wondering
but that may not be true

What if wondering is all they do
those things moving around us

wide-eyed, swimming,
buzzing, eating

that unbegun sentence
hangs in the air

and being happens
without ado

The College of Poets

We were cut off from one another for so long,
And now we are assembled
Yearning to connect and tell one another
We understand, we understand, we understand.

All the envy has been hosed away.
If we criticize it is in the name of collegiality
And solely with the objective
Of making a good thing better.

Garlands of asphodel deck our brows
Figures of speech hover in the air:
'Amputees twitching their phantom limbs'
'Neutered dogs attending to their nutsacks'

Geese 209

How virtuous they seem this morning
squabbling on Marydale Pond,
pointing in every direction, leaderless,
humming from hard migration.

They are just the most recent group
to descend into St. Paul to rest up,
judging from the goose crap everywhere
like green toothpaste in the grass.

Their virtue is their honking courage
attempting this 1400 mile flight
all the way down to Padre Island in the Gulf
across every kind of junkyard and garage.

Not one of them's a drama queen,
drawing attention to the epicness underway
or the brothers who fell to the hunters' guns
or got sick and couldn't flap another flap,

They shut their beaks and kept flying.

The Soul Is Not Perfect, Gets Set in Its Ways ²¹⁰

And even when you personally
are struggling to change
It may lie there, with a dazed expression,
expecting you to serve it.
You must be firm sometimes with the soul!
Otherwise it will suspend
in its halo of laziness
And you will be stuck like that
for a long time.
You want to see the soul shake a leg,
You want to rouse it from the pupa stage?
Bang a paper sack beside its ear
And it will make that face it makes
Like, Why don't you just leave me alone.
Say, You belong to me,
now get to work.

Poet Struck By Train

for Denis Joe of Liverpool, who had a bad day

I hear the chime in the poem's voice
and in the notes you write
you hunger for truth and you tell it too
you understand pain is the face of injustice
in an otherwise lopsided world

I know what it is like to fall forever
and wonder how there could be
anything additional below
no whiskered root to grab hold of

why rage against a world
that can't help being busted?

fire is proof that fire exists
and can't be extinguished ever
not by a train a thousand miles long
smashing into cheek and bone

the human heart is infinite
survives these raggedy envelopes, us,
keeps beating after red-faced suns
have hissed and had their say and gone away

Last Night in Paris 211

You couldn't sleep and the cats in the courtyard
could tell you were a tourist
and poured a cinema of deprivation
into every plaintive yowl.

Did you know what it was to be homeless,
without a dish to call one's own
without a calf to lean into and vibrate?

And this clamor continues for hours,
until you understand existentialism
because everywhere you go people

in this city restore themselves by morning
while you lie awake fretting
about the mobs of the faceless
and the general strike,

animals who should not even be
if the country had a spaying program
or a wheelchair ramp
or an elevator to the loading platform

the unintended offspring of the night
lean into the crutches and mewl
and this is the way that Paris is

a city of battered beautifuls
the gorgeous and the gaunt
and never more mighty at the base

than the heft of a kitten's paw

The Outlaw 212

(Original verse began: Jesus was a suicide)

Jesse was a suicide
the way he egged on the law.
After a while they had no choice
but to string him from the bough.

Jesse's father beat on him
until the neighbors howled.
But Jesse loved that old man
and did as he was told.

Jesse was a poet who
invaded women's soul.
He looked them in the eye
and called them Pearl.

Jesse had a gang of friends
but he could count on none.
Not one of them stood below
the rope that he made taut.

Jesse was a dead man when
they set him in the crate.
When spirits came to fetch him
they were too late.

The outlaw disappeared
Beyond the Wasatch Range
Jesse was a bastard
and no one took his name

Old Girlfriends

I'm not supposed to but I think of them.
Not the way they are now, wise and complicated,
but the daffy way it was joyful to please me
when we were young and things were possible.

What a blessing their kindness was,
the future stretching like ropes of airplane glue.
Me and them alive in the big house together,
Grateful to be able to get at one another.

I want to pick each one up in turn and spin her
And look into her eyes and say thank you
for thinking I was someone to dally with,
that our hours were somehow well-spent.

This one thought she saw something in the man.
This one said, He's not going to hurt me, or
He's not the one but he'll do for now, moments
gleaming like a badge upon my heart.

Moab 213

On Sunday when the family was camping
Three miles up the Colorado from town,
The little boy wandered too close to the water.
His sister screamed as he was carried away
And she said she saw him wave goodbye
Although he might have been reaching for help.
A man who lived three doors down in Salt Lake
Was camping in a lot marked No Camping Allowed.
He had agreed to keep watch on the river.
The methane in the decomposing body
causes it to float, he said, and we get the boy back.
and what could I tell him but good luck.

I think of the moment the father experienced,
The moment every parent sits up in bed
Because you have let down your guard
And the treasure is gone, you will never get it back
And your punishment is for that instant
To freeze over forever like unmeltable ice.
And you say, If only I had done this or that
Or if only my last words had not been so sharp.
Doggone it Elmer can't you see daddy's busy?
Can't you play by your sister where you're not in the way?
It was your number one job to keep an eye on him.
God will forgive you but that's about it.

Proof of God ²¹⁴

Is in the breath so simple.
Breathe in, breathe out,
Then tell where one begins
And the other ends.
Or tell me it was you
Who gave instructions to the lungs,
"I have inhaled enough, old friend,
Now it's time to let it go."
The truth is, it happens
And it happens again,
Over and over, every minute
We are alive, a moebius loop
Of oxygen and carbon
That is just exactly
What we require,
Not an advanced degree
in gas hydraulics, a bird
On a branch is as competent as that.
Mechanics call this device
A governor, and it governs us
Without our being aware,
And it is everywhere,
In every cell and every blink
And every balanced process
That there is.
And you can say
That's no old man with a beard
But I say well it's something
And it keeps us going day to day,
A will to order that provides us
Opportunities,

But you need not believe to draw air,
It is given, and there is no moment
When we are free from this
Casual miracle,
This tap on the shoulder
That says here, friend,
See what you can do.



The Soul Is Wedded to the World 215

Habit leads one to suppose
all it thinks about is heaven,
it is the one thing on its mind
the unimprovable place
the out there the not here the sublime.

And you can see when it lies sleeping
it wants to move out of here,
it is running as fast as it can,
it is galloping to a better realm
that is always snapdragons and pie.

But the soul is too dumb
to be anywhere but here.
Behold the furrows folding in
on themselves, behold
the stuporous stare.

Even in its dreams it is rooting in the now,
it is a digging a channel to get to where it is
it is roaring out at the speed of thought
because movement prevents it from thinking.

Eclogue

Half a Monopoly board
blown into a thistle bush
in the Colorado chaparral –
the game ended here.



The Soul Has Good Days and Bad 216

And the bad are characterized
by outward deeds
generated from fear
which seeks to esophagate the soul

Every opportunity for good
is also temptation
Every couch is a banquet
Every shoe a summons to bop

It is a bender for the soul
and it washes up on the shore
of the next day
mortified with its error

No newspaper tells this tale
rolled up or otherwise.
It is the same as it ever was,
the stumble then the crawling back

and where does the soul
find solace save
from the scent of forgiveness
on the back
of the Master's right hand?

The Soul Stands Watch ²¹⁷

The soul knows it is standby equipment.
Some days for it are not days at all,
because it stays in its box,
uninvited to the world.

The soul has suffered all it can stand
And it has promised itself,
the next time you betray it,
watch out.

But the soul stands now by your grave for you
and all that waiting is forgotten
it only knows it misses you
and it howls.

The Soul Is Not Perfect, Gets Set in Its Ways ²¹⁸

And even when you personally are struggling to change
It may lie there, with a dazed expression,
expecting you to serve it.

You must be firm sometimes with the soul!
Otherwise it will suspend in its halo of laziness
And you will be stuck like that for a long time.

You want to see the soul shake a leg,
To want to rouse it from the pupa stage
Band a paper sack beside its ear

And it will make that face it makes
Like, Why don't you just leave me alone.
Say, You belong to me, now get to work.

The Soul Shits Itself 219

not out of self-hatred
but because the devil
in his wiles
sets snares in our path

And this ejection goes
to the heart of pride
that a son of heaven
drags evidence of the world
like a list of sins
that cannot be forgiven

Except that they can,
though the eyes roll back
humiliatedly
and bags of water tumble down
like holy grace
from a garden hose
and lots of liquid Joy

The Reason We Are ²²⁰

For God to be alone
all those years in the dark
and to suddenly have us
swarming all over him

Not made in his image
but kissing and kissing
despite the mistakes we
make on the carpet

It was so lonely before

The Soul Gets Caught Up 221

The soul returns to you
entangled in bad ideas.
It has been rummaging in
the hedges again.

There are no shortcuts
for this deprogramming.
Each burr of thought
must be excised
individually.

You berate it with
the wisdom you have obtained.
This curiosity
is not your friend.

The mind does not know
what it knows.
But souls do not
compromise.
It is all or nothing
with the likes of them.

The scent of information
draws them on,
the foolish heart
has no recourse
except follow

The Soul Thinks

You Belong to It ²²²

It's got it all backward,
that you are an appendage to it,
and not the other way around.

But it's absurd you say,
How can you be in charge?
I'm the practical one, I open the doors.

But it explains how it can be so demanding.
Of course it bellows when you are gone.
Because that is not what it wants.

Of course it goes out of its mind when you leave.
Why would you ever want to leave,
how could you?

And all this time you thought you were caring for it
and a thin leash connected you,
looped around your head.

Spirit 223 *

if you have
a better idea
I'd like
to hear it

223 DOG As a Metaphor for the Soul (2008)

* I stopped praying when Daniele died. Just couldn't do it any more. That is what this poem-let is about.

Tattoos 224 *

Side of her right leg: skull with flowers and a snake

Side of her left leg: minotaur skull, with green tentacles

Lower back, centered: a spider, a flower, and red flames

Upper left back: skull with devil motif

Upper right back: skull with angel motif

Left shoulder and arm: against a maze-like background

a skeleton with bovine skull and hooves

lifting a bottle in salute

224 Things (2009)

* Found poem; the text of the medical examiner's list of Daniele Finley's actual body marks and tattoos

The Soul Isn't Especially Smart ²²⁵

There are so many things it cannot do.
It cannot do your taxes.
It cannot read or type.
It can't quote from Lord Russell.
It cannot be wry, it is not in its nature.
It will never discover a cure for anything.
It lacks irony, drollery, duplicity
In word and thought.
It is unable to say one thing
while meaning another.
This thing is so thick
it can't carry a grudge.

Dream of God Driving a Bulldozer 226 *

*He seemed very purposeful, and happy ...
damned if I can figure out why*

It's what he uses to get around ...
It isn't very fast ...
And the mileage is pathetic ...
But he has a ton of gas ...

He sits high in the seat,
bouncing with every lurch,
blue fumes pouring out around him ...
as he leans into the dirt

He wears hard hat and safety glasses
and a corncob pipe,
which he clenches with his smile
and a rag he uses to wipe

Everywhere his tread digs in ...
it stutters in the clay ...
then a wall of shit issues forth
at the nudging of his blade ...

226 The Rapture (2009)

* I wrote a dozen 'shake fist at God' poems in the wake of Daniele's death, So far, nothing terrible has (additionally) happened.

Pain Was My Bread

I must have been French

Cartes Postales ²²⁷

This is just to say
I bought the most beautiful cards
On my trip with Rachel
Pictures of the Roman theater
And the lighthouse in the proud harbor

But I was only gone three weeks
And the first week I was too confused
And the second week I never saw the Poste
And the third week I thought, hell
I'll beat the postcards home

One day I saw in the rearview mirror
The ancient city of Carcassone
Squatting on a hilltop like a soft turban
My eyes beheld the glory
Thinking of you

My Darling Serpentine 228

I thought it was so tragic
And nothing could be badder
I peeked inside the basket
and beheld the speckled adder

I predicted mass destruction
The rope could only tighten
But no noose is a good noose
It was a cat-eyed python

I thought I had shed blood for you
There was none such as this
'The poet of the universe'
And then I heard the hiss

Les Sangliers ²²⁹

The wild boars of the hilltops
Venture down at night
Attracted to the perfume
Of cantaloupe and squash
Stealthy of snout and grunting opinion
They scour the sand for fallen grapes
And when they gaze bloody-eyed
At the moon
They bristle in their beauty

Aubade 230

(on parting at morning)

The darkness parts reluctantly
A dog in the black barks once,
And bats flit silently beside the house
At a boar come by to gnaw on the apricots
or a deer dipping for the sweet chew of romaine

The crow of the coq seems premature
The church bells sound seven
But nothing happens, the village
Is fumbling for the snooze button
Then the first hint of lifting
Suffuses the horizon

The lights of cars along the Dordogne
appear and disappear as they round curves
Cats, cold and complaining from the chill
Sound sour, then the clatter of a beer truck
Rattling its bottles on a bump in the road

A church bell bangs for a whole half minute
And the fathers stumble out of bed
You can hear the ignition click and groan,
the ohs and ahs of changing gears.

And Madame Fleury walks in her night coat,
Rolling pin tucked under one arm,
and the dark holds a candle to the world

God's Body ²³¹

The campaign raged into its eighth decade, hopeless from the get-go.

All God had to do was think of his enemies and they ceased to exist. You would be talking to a guy, and suddenly he was no longer there.

God would wait until they got within a spear-throw to blink, and then he laughed that awful empty laugh. What an asshole he was.

And that was why, despite the danger, there was never a shortage of volunteers.

They signed up by the thousands, eager to end the tyranny, the caprice, and that gruesome laugh.

And the soldiers fought all their lives, until God thought of them, or they died.

The Lord God mowed them down by the million, and he laughed his giant belly-laugh.

One day God slipped up, he became intoxicated with his own self-regard and lapsed into a kind of holy coma.

A group of commandos came upon him as he lay open-mouthed on the sand, and they lanced him in the neck and armpit and groin.

Divine blood rushed from his wounds, till the seashore stank for miles.

It was a mighty and an unexpected victory.

Without asking, they stripped his body with long knives, and peeled away his fat in lengthy strips.

They rendered the fat, which screamed in the cauldron, and filtered it through cheesecloth.

Altogether they saved thirty-two barrels of oil from God's body.

The oil was distributed to the people of the world, who burned it in lamps.

The lamps stayed lit for the lifetimes of the people. They read, and talked, and danced, and it was their turn to laugh, to the light of God's pure oil.

And though they were nervous about the darkness that was coming, they had no regrets.

Why?

Why do friends love us
while we hate our guts?

How can they overlook
the disturbances we fix on?

The patterns and indulgences
the sickening repetitions

Or is it that we spend
all our time in here, with that

And we are so exhausted
and the relationship is tense

Maybe we need to back off a bit
take a break from ourselves

Until we are superficial but loving
the way good friends are

And we see us as they do,
from somewhat of a distance

these forgivable things

When Fat People Get Skinny

When they diet and hit a good patch
And for a while a lot of meat slides off
It is like a cowl has been peeled away

And you see them in their glory now
Like resurrected souls
This is the way they were supposed to be

But also the look of sorrow they wear
For all the things they have suffered
And anger at the times they were betrayed

One more piece of pie, Louise
You want to always be jolly, don't you?
Come on, you know you want it

Nevertheless they are beautiful
And even if they are wasting from some disease
There is this shining look of pride that says

None of you ever really knew me
And a glint of joy that in their undoing
In their diminution and melting away

They are allowed to pass through a green land
And say I was like you, and you, and you
Like Christ on Easter Day

Somewhere on the journey I picked up the habit
Of answering Rachel absently
Mm-HMM,
With a hard accent on the second syllable,
Like, Say WHAT? Or ‘Scuse ME?
So that what sounds like it should be agreement,
Oh my yes indeedy!
Comes across instead as judgmental reproach,
You want it WHEN?
You really believe THAT?
Rachel looks at me like I am Rex Harrison
Correcting her on matters of everything
From architecture to history to French vocabulary
And I sound like the world's consummate ass
But I have no idea I'm doing it
until I say it and look at her horror-stricken
And evidently, deep down,
in the pit of the soul where the dark things skitter
That ass must be the man I am
The guy who waits for other people to make mistakes
So he can shimmy down from his goalpost
And administer correction with a bonk.
Oh DEAR, pas MOI, ma CHERE.
Better to have one's tongue yanked
from its housing than to be this
fruity fish
But even keeping mouth shut is no guarantee
because it is a hum, it is not even words,
you can speak evil without articulating sounds
O God I must guard against this tendency
with all that is in me, Oh NO!

There it goes AGAIN, once you start
you can't STOP, I have always been
a know-it-all but until now I knew to
keep that information to myself.
They told me if went to Europe it would
change my outlook
But I look in the mirror and all I see
is Transylvania



The Fly 233

Walking forlorn along the Mississippi,
I felt a deerfly land on my cheek.

Instead of me slapping it, it slapped me!
The tiniest hand you could imagine reared back
and let me have it.
At most I felt a tiny itch.

And then a sound.
I could barely hear.
Perhaps, "britzel ... britzel ..."?

But I got the sense, loud and clear, that it was
warning me about something,
urging me to shape up.

"Listen," it was saying, "I'm going say this once.
Life is pain. Accept it! Accept it,
you stupid, stupid man."

And then it buzzed off.

Now I am downgrading the alert.
It couldn't have meant much. Otherwise,
every insect that annoys you is some kind of angel,
sent to deliver a message.
About what is expected.
About how we must live.

I'm sorry, there are too many insects
for that to be true.

Summation

I know that you loved me
though the rails clacked
and the TV raged

because I was no good in the way
you would want good done
because I was the one

Particularly, or perhaps
it was the light of late afternoon
that rolled and stretched

like a davenport dream –
my hand on your hipbone,
like a witness taking an oath

Advice for the Funeral 234

Thoughts are like tenpenny nails.
They have a point, they have a heel,
and you can drive them deep into muscle,
and then extract them with a claw.

If you insist.

We trust our instincts.
But our instincts are the reason we suffer.
We say, "Obviously, this,"
but it is far from obvious,
in fact it is wrong
the way chomping on a fishhook
is wrong.

You need to find a new way to live,
in which you take it easy on yourself.
You are the only you you have.
Conserve, preserve, pull back on the reins.

Somewhere you got the idea that
hurting yourself was your job,
and that was bad,
but then you became a workaholic.

Stop it.

God gave you two brains,
and you never use one of them.
Unwrap it now, and set it in its place,
and take it for a spin.

Instead of empty space
put a bird there and let it chirp.
An annoying little bird.
And let it chirp until you wish it would shut up

while it drowns out your stupidity.

Someone got what they wanted
so what makes you restless?

Do you want to spend the rest of your life
like a knucklehead, never getting anything?

Stand up.
Get out of the street.
Walk, and see where that gets you.

Intuitions 235 *

Why do we hold them
In such high regard
When they are what got us
The way that we are?



235 Midnight at the Mounds (2004)

* A favorite. Why do we hold them in such high regard?

Beheaded

The word has been undermined
so you think of mattocks
and stained chopping blocks, it

should be a term of approval, as in
that is one well-beheaded young man,
and he will go places, or

her beauty was beheaded with
a diadem of roses that pulsed
with fragrance in the dying light, or

for use in a vow
when it must be especially clear
what we intend, as I'll
beheaded home soon

Six Theological Options ^{236 *}

When your heart is broken
you have six theological options.

You can say this proves there is no God
and do whatever you like.

You can bury yourself deeper than ever in God
and pray for acceptance or elucidation.

You can cut a deal with God,
though chances are it's too late for that.

You can be disappointed with God
and spend your days asking why, why.

You can decide that you were God all along
and it was on you all the while.

Or you can declare war on Him
and live life like a soldier.

236 Desalinization (2010)

* I have had people tell me there are more than six options. But they won't tell me what the others are. I think they want a nice one to be there.

Game *

some say the world
will end in stone,

others paper,
and still some blade

because fear makes hash
of every laugh

and laughter drives love
to distraction

but love's cover
can smother fear

rock scissors paper
fear laughter love

* There's a reference to Frost in here. Too many references, probably.

The Soul Dwells Outside Time 237

clinically signifying
that its temporal lobe
is minuscule
a teardrop in a drum

which is why it is as excited
to see you returning from
the store
as from a dozen years
in jail

to the world this proves it
is an imbecile
and yes, the soul is an imbecile,
and yet!

in the larger realm
it means love does
not parse out its grace
with a dropper

but by the mainspring
straining
inside the machine
that is always
shuddering

for your touch

At Fifty-Eight *

It is something to celebrate,
the day one turns fifty eight.

It is the midpoint of life's domain
the fun half spent, the rest remains,

one slowly cranks up the first high bend
then roars like thunder to the end,

I drag the bag of bent clubs that are mine
and commence the back nine.

* The joke here is insisting that 58 is life's midpoint

What Is a Painting

First it is a meditation
on the thing that is in it,
a boat, a man playing cards,
and the way the man
looks at the others around him.

A house shivers under a cold sun
its shingles blown aslant,
the paint is bleared and blued
by hot and dripping rain.

Then it's a dance with light,
because no one paints
in the dark. Seeing is what
it's all about.

Then the shadows play
on the faces, the light reveals
what burns inside –
tiredness, suffering, boundless joy.

Finally it is action,
there are strokes involved,
strokes! each one a mighty blow
to untruth, an assault

so one is having an adventure
on one's feet, a duel to the death
or to life, or however,
but it is just exciting, you see.

We get into trouble,
then work our way out again..
And while I am no painter,
I think of this undertaking

with an unaccustomed

reverence –
it may be the closest
I ever come to God.

Clints and Grykes *

Clints be the islands that float apart.

Grykes be the fathoms that must be paved.

Schist be the rock that guards your heart.

Karst be the stones that cap your grave.



* Geological terms. On Ireland's Burren, a cap of limestone pushed up from the Atlantic, called the karst. The karst is sometimes broken into two looks – the stone outcroppings and the spaces separating them. The overall effect is extreme inhospitality.

Unruined

I envy them
they can hear sad music

for the vicarious
pleasure of it

it takes them down
but not all the way

their tears a vacation
from not feeling
,

their floret of anguish
a change of socks

Shampoo ²³⁸

When I was little I too howled
when the stuff got in my eyes
This before Johnson & Johnson was.

And though my mother cupped my brow
With the soft of her hand
And pointed to the spider

in the corner of the bathroom ceiling
The spider I was to watch
Until the coast was clear

I couldn't help myself, I looked
And the soap was like daggers
And I cried, how I cried

One day I discovered
You could live with the suds
If you simply closed your eyes

Until the foam was rinsed down
Your cheeks and escaped down the drain
But you had to be willing to do nothing

I want to get word to babies everywhere
Oh my stupid little friends
Wear the blindfold and you will never weep

Unmitigated Gall

The oak tree has a gall around its trunk,
the exception to its perfect upright lines
that makes the tree look pregnant
and suggests a shortened life.

But what does a tree know.
Water is drawn, sugar is distributed,
leaves splay themselves in the sun
like stewardesses on layoff.

Photosynthesis wants no more
and the effect of a cancer
at the waistline, a tumor of wood
throwing everything off, is nil.

The game goes on, the process proceeds
despite deformity, despite
circuitousness
through cambium, xylem, and phloem.

The Kindly Cannon 239 *

and everyone he met
he blessed with gladness

eight pounds round
was his heart of iron

and matchsticks
were his friends

239 Horses Work Hard (2000)

* I'm told the 'and' construction, used here and in practically every poem in this volume, is a quintessentially Irish transition. I found some comfort in that.

Courtesy 240

When the arrow sticks
Don't make a fuss
Reach behind you
And find the shaft

If it is plausible
break it off
But it won't be, so
Don't make a scene

Sky Repair ²⁴¹

As a child I had a recurring dream.
The sky was a tent-top of glass, or porcelain
And I saw a crack begin to form,
And it was my job to repair the crack.
I climbed a ladder to the brink of the sky
and I was patching the crack with spackle
When another crack formed,
and another, and another.
The profoundest grief swept over me,
Knowing my job was impossible to do.
The atoms of the universe were coming apart
And how did I get saddled with this.
Then I woke up to my sister dying in one room,
My mother sobbing in the next,
My father snoring drunk in the third.
The atoms of the universe coming apart,
And my job, repairing the crack.

241 My wife would say this is what's wrong with me, a lack of lightness, a sense that everything is on me. It arose from the sense I had, as a boy, that a great tragedy was forming around me – and somehow I had to stop it.

Sprinkler 242

Underfoot the worms awake.
The sudden flood intolerable,
and they rotate to the surface
pink and brown and nearly straight
like little socks hung out to dry
and exposed to the idiot sun
and if I had the right kind of ears
I would hear them gasp.

A Great One *

I never constructed a great one with my hands,
one that, once released, swept cities away like a runaway
reservoir,
and people did not resist its surge
because they knew the flood was for them,

Because a great one feels like it knows who you are,
has taken up your cause without you being aware.
A great one is compassionate yet ignorant,
It knows you better than you know yourself,

It is courageous because it doesn't give a shit
if it's corny and it doesn't care if you try to pass it
through the baleen of your ideology
to filter its truth until it becomes acceptable

A great one is like a hammer-blow to the head
And the best of us feel we have been pummeled to mush,
Our heads are like boiled bowling balls, empty and malleable
and marked by a preternatural swirl.

A great one lays down its life for you with a laugh
Because it knows it can never die, its gestures
Cost it nothing, at the end of this movie another one begins,
and so the penalties we dread facing are a joke to it.

It is always flush with cash because it is of a piece with riches,
It picks up every check and leaves hundred dollar tips.
A great one is generous because money is infinite
but you cannot know this until you spend it.

A great one summers on the cape and winters in the mountains
Because the air is better and the company convivial
And the pinchball on the atomizer is never out of reach

* This began as an essay about what makes a poem great. But then I thought, who cares about that? What makes anything great? What does great mean exactly? What is a great one? By "vaguely up" the topic, it seemed to work better.

So that the voice is ever liquid and the timbre ever strong.

It is ushered into the waiting limousine
And speeds away to the next great moment,
The testimonial banquet, the honorary degree,
The reception line that loops back on itself like an homage to
infinity.

The great one acknowledges no competitors,
dips its bread in the bowl and mops up all the wine,
we stand in its wake as it shrinks to a dot, teary-eyed, choking
on the blue fumes of its burning.

Ophelia ²⁴³

I feel you,
and I feel you feel me too

I want to ask how
one floats laded down

with so much information?
Every thing

that doesn't kill us
makes us sadder

Like a mermaid
tangled in a net

you have given up
gasping for good.

243 The Rapture (2009)

Drama King

The moment you cried out your disapproval,
Your stirring Hey! Lashed out against all falsity,
so sweet, the anger of almost being innocent,
the voice of that part of the sinful world
that did not think it was part of the sinful world

It tousled your indignation,
because there is now no distinguishing the real from the false
because there is no going back
until blood has been shed
and the old skin of need has been slithered out of
for good and discarded
in a husk of spent diamonds

And in that moment you were lost because
You enjoyed it perhaps a little too much,
And a sickening part of you knew
it would come back to that moment and try to recreate it,
again and again and again,
and summon fresh feeling against the lies of the world
and this time really give it the gas,
and this time your denunciation would be
more artful and more telling,
and this time the world would say,
wow, this is even better than the other time
and it is consummated

You are like a lunkheaded dog with only one trick
only instead of rolling over
you summoned all the authenticity you could simulate
on such short notice
and then like the leg of a wheel you spoke

and you were too young and too beautiful to explain
that they owed it to themselves to go fuck themselves
because you were in no mood to prostitute
the depth of your passion to salve their idiot wounds

and even on the off-chance that you did, they would just say
yes, that, there, you see, that's the thing you do
that is so remarkable

and then you must choose between killing them
with the only object available to you,
an ice-cream scoop with a silver handle
and what a concavity that will make in their foreheads
as if they had been blessed with a single wonderful idea
but now it has been ushered away

or turn your back on them
and wrap yourself in your cloak
and the night
and that will be that for them,
the beauty done and gone
and not to be darkening this doorstep again any time soon
and like Arthur Rimbaud, legless in Abyssinia,
you are borne away on a litter,
in a fever, raving and
firing your pistols

Shrooms Gone Wild

the wilderness is underfoot
the mussels on the hulls

sunny caps are glad pagodas
winking in the sun

vaudevillians spin
silver plates on sticks

upturned cup deformed
like a beggar's hand

flash of tiger fishes
changing their direction

the phantom glides
from stump to stump

silver butterflies
like flying menus

tiny acorns tip their hats
to no nutritional value

Peace Poem 244

It's like you're driving the interstate
And you hit a pothole and blow out a strut
And you stand by the roadside
Kicking the chrome
And cursing the road maintenance crew
For being too late with a shovel of patch
Saying son of a bitch what a crummy system
And you don't seem to notice
The headless horse in the crook of a tree,
Or that there is no road, just stink and smoke,
And the days that used to make you
Call on God for better times
Are never coming back.



Pelagius

Little is known of this man
except he refuted original sin.
Some suggest he was Irish
With a vision nightmarish:
Adam set 'a bad example'
When he bit into the apple.
And Jesus did not die for us.
Augustine railed at Ephesus
His heresy had sufficed.
To gut the crucified Christ.

La Femme 245

The woman was hanged onstage
and the lifting sprained her back
and since the opera things
have been difficult.

When she is in spasm,
I knead out
The knots and tangles
from her spine.

When I massage her I work
from her neck to her soles.
She whimpers like a doe,
if does whimper – I don't know.

She is the general
directing the attack
indicating with a nod
what happens next and how.

She is the wounded lioness
clambering up a hill
And despite the pain
She will make it to the top

We have a deal
That when we say farewell
and she beams at me as now,
on the railway landing

She will be the femme
My lion-woman
And I am her man
for the duration.

Sometimes the Soul Will Hotfoot It Away

246

And you will not know what set it off.
A smell, a movement in the brush,
you don't know, but there he goes,
and you begin the long list of tasks you must
perform when he takes off.
Calling him sweetly, waiting patiently,
then turning foul as hours pass and you see no sign.
You told yourself you could weather this storm
But in fact you can't, and you stomp around
cursing his name and his sire and dam,
so ungrateful for all the things you do
so disobedient in the face of your goodness.
You are nearly weeping when he trots back to you
And you know you are not even entitled to ask
where he has been, what he has been up to,
It is the mystery of the relationship,
and all you can do is sigh and let him
clamber back into the back seat.

When You Encounter A Bear

Appraise the situation. Might it be friendly? Do you see cubs in the vicinity? Is there a tree nearby, or a circus?

Do not run. You can't outrun a bear. Don't try.

People say to run downhill from a grizzly. **Don't.**

Try **backing away.** They let you do that sometimes.

Climb that tree. Climb at least 33 feet off the ground so it can't get to you and hurl you down.

If successful with the tree, be sure you brought **food** with you, but not food with a delicious aroma. We suggest Skittles.

Try **pepper spray.** But know that pepper can act as an attractant.

Fight the bear. It will be difficult, but it will **respect you** more.

Keep your backpack on. Wear it in front, across your beating heart.

Do not **play dead** until you almost are.

Once mauled, **be patient.** Wait until the bear has finished to crawl away.

Imperfect Tree

There is a large silver maple in our front yard ...
It is not a perfect tree ...
It does not burn bright like a sugar maple in September ...
Nor the radiant leaves of the scarlet maple ...
It seems suburban with its silver skin and delicate leaves ...
It grows so fast its trunk has split with stretchmarks ...
So thirsty the rest of the lawn is dry ...
In the fall it drops its undistinguished yellow leaves by the ton ...
It is not a perfect tree ...
But it is a patient presence, and it cools the house ...
It shields us from the glare of the sun ...
Cardinals and blue jays convene there for their business ...
And it never, ever, ever, ever leaves ...

Our neighbor is cutting down his smaller maple ...
It blocked sunlight from his home, which is much driven past, for
its luminous openness ...
Which is admittedly not so apparent when a tree is blocking the
view ...
But he's tired of the tree's mediocrity ...
So out comes the chainsaw, and down goes the tree, and into the
house it goes, one armload at a time ...
I wonder if it feels like an honor ...
After all those years in the cold and the rain ...
Those thankless, dripping, freezing years of service ...
To be invited in by the fire?

L'abbaye de Les Abeilles 247

(Abbey of the bees)

In Caunes-Minervois the Cathares were put to the torch,
Twelfth-century hippies whose simplicity offended
The powers that were.

This afternoon I read in the Abbey of St. Adelbert,
A hotel now, with motion sensors
For late-night stair climbing.

Between a crack in the courtyard wall
Honeybees exit to forage for flowers,
mute apart from a casual hum.

Narcissus, chrysanthemum, hydrangea and rose,
A friend to those who cannot
find the Latin words to pray.

The Albigensians have resumed their positions,
High in the ramparts they toil,
Stings sheathed.

They go about their business in the beauty
They spite both government and the church,
Their only objective is sweetness.

No earthly power can tear them from their hive
And only light substantiates
Their song.

Cholla

White thumb poking up
from the desert roadbed,
tell me what your high hopes are:

'To produce a prickly-plum
of such perfect sweetness
to offer my master the sun,

so as to contradict my status
a lifetime in a ditch
dust-coated by passing cars.

Or is it to reach as far
as thin fingers can go
like intercessory hands

and to serve as arrows
of deflation in the hard
black meat of your tires?'

Lascaux ²⁴⁸

Down the twisty corridors
The animals dance by torchlight
The bison and the bison,
Wild bull and wild bull,
The reindeer curtsies to his partner
Which licks him on the brow
The wet muzzles of ancient cows
Exhale snow in the crowded hall.
The walls grow closer
And the calcite drips longer
And the jaws of the father
Grind down on the son.
The mountain of ice
And the museum of fire,
the colors of oxide and manganese mingle
Concavities bloom and convexities swell
And the mountain museum devours
A hillful of christs
Poking out of the ground

There is Vincent shot through the lung
And Henri drowned in the ink in his well
Verlaine shoots Rimbaud
And Rimbaud shoots Verlaine
And there is Picasso
Bowing before the rhino
And there is Duchamps
On his stuttering staircase
The knot of mares of Marc Chagall
Float upside down on the flickering wall
And ice and stalactite take their toll
of the rust and charcoal and oil
the bear and the elk and
the ox and the bull
the cave grinds against the bones of all
and sunshine collapses

248 Cartes Postales (2008)

to a tiny black ball

Skibbereen

*A town notorious during
the great potato famine, 1846-1847*

Step to, step to Skibbereen,
don't let them know you are dreaming.²⁴⁹

Let my hounds come lick my face
For why should friends be afeared.²⁵⁰

Let the insects play tag-the-old-man
amid the confines of my beard

And bid the local beauties sigh,
whom long I longed to be beside.

Sheila Murphy, you knew my vow
I gave all my eyes for you.²⁵¹

Peggy McCarthy kick over the hearth
and prod me by that cheerful fire.²⁵²

Fetch the English major general
who taught me how to lie still.²⁵³

Here's to patting my round torso,
Full to here with mangel-wurzel.²⁵⁴

249 Poem began with the 'sound coincidence' of Skibbereen and Jerry Garcia's song "Sugaree" – a song about quarantine.

250 Tales abound of families unable to prevent feral dogs from devouring their dead parents, or children. Their own dogs and other animals had long since been killed and eaten.

251 Eyes, potatoes. Murphy remains the most common name in Skibbereen. My deliberately obscure allusion here is to Shulamite, the love object of Song of Songs – and referenced in Paul Celan's haunting Holocaust poem, 'Death Fugue.'

252 Many families were buried simply by knocking down the cabin they lived in and setting it ablaze.

253 A pun on English major and major general, and a reference to Gen. James Thornberry, who counseled against confiscating landlord's crops to keep the Irish populace alive.

254 A rhubarb-like root that was prevalent in the area, hard to digest, but yielding some nutrition.

Now just a pint to please the host
and tap it from the neckermost.²⁵⁵

Don't dip your finger in the soup
or have it handed back to you.

Oh Mary Kilkenny with the lucky penny –
Oh my comely girl Kathleen!

I shall live and I shall die
in the happy Land of Ire

It's fine to be plying a ploughman's
dream in Skibbereen

255 A common way to stave off starvation, so long as livestock were still alive was to bleed them and make a kind of blood-biscuit with oatmeal.

Les Vacances Sont Finis 256

(Our holiday concludes)

How can one think of going home
To the gristle of living
The pummel of performance
The ordinariness that mugs you
And shakes you down
Till change fountains from pockets
Puffed out like fleurs-de-lis?

One may live like the Baron of Beynac
Resolute and armored
More trilobite than man
Brooding from his granite rampart
A danger to all who glance up
And get blinded by surmise.

Or one may return as tourist-as-clown
Patting his wallet for reassurance
The joker in the deck whose
Hat-horns dangle, unerect to the last,

Not “I know” which is a wall of stone
To crouch behind,
But “I think” or “perhaps” or
“Unless I’m mistaken,” all hedged
And botanical and bearing red berries
A little translucent once held
To the light.

And one would be slow in all that one does,
Slower than a tree-sloth to minimize
All sense of ownership because who
Is an author, we are really all actors
All playing our part,
And “Introducing, as the sloth, the sloth.”

256 Cartes Postales (2008)

But be thorough because
Time has been set aside to do so
Not the flash of lighting that sings
Every sage eyebrow but the thick ooze
That lubricates the belly of the slug.

And one will be worshipful
For there is grandeur back there
In Minnesota, one recalls,
And as following in the footsteps
Of the painters did not make one paint,
So the guy with the guidebook
was not not a fool.

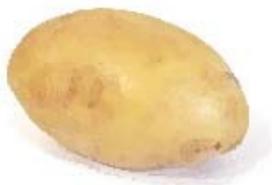
Doing the Non-Ado

Coulda

Shoulda

Woulda

Buddha



Dream of Whitman

I dreamed I played basketball
with the bard of America,
he spun the globe on his finger
and said, young fellow,
you must not dwell inside yourself,
step out, step up to the world
where everything is revealed.
I stood in the rain on the bridge with him
and he shouted into the din,
There is no modesty now,
no inhibition,
no deflected blows.
He clasped me around the shoulders:
My son, it all just goes!

Zeppo *

At 6: 30 a.m. Daniele releases you
From her bedroom
And you traipse upstairs to me.
I am writing, but
You don't care.
You plead with your midget's grimace:
My canines are floating!

I stand from a now-unfinishable poem
And descend two flights, and
swing open the back door,
You lift your leg against the barbecue
And are framed by the early light
And the first green blades of spring
And steam rises from your pee
Like a prayer released straightway to God.

* Zeppo was Daniele's dog – an odd, unreliable, but loving Rhodesian ridgeback dachshund mix. He chased cats up trees then followed up. Daniele got him after her first attempt, and their bond was so strong I imagined he would keep her alive until we found an answer. It still stuns me that she left him. Him, of all people.

In Minnesota

A friend showed me a poem he had written
and I was appalled.

Why did you type these words, I asked.
It's so sad, you could have been brushing carrots instead,
or changing the gravel in your fish tank,
something useful.

What you wrote is so poetic
and such a lot of work
and so hard to understand,
it's a wonder that you did it.

Have you ever considered that your muse
is out to get you,
to embarrass you so badly with her inspiration
that you dare not leave your house?

Consider the possibility.

It's funny because life is full of adventures
and coincidences
and funny stories,
but this is what we always write about
O my soul the Stygian darkness ...

You know what we should be doing?
We should be laughing our asses off
at our ridiculous lives
and the bumpy journeys we've all been sent on.
We should be passing the jug
and blowing wine out our noses
at the incessant meddling of God,
not hid indifference to our plights.

A poem should be like sticking your fingers
in a lamp base
to see what it feels like,

it should make us clap like toddlers
or tin monkeys with cymbals,
we should be rolling our eyes
and sneezing underwater.

Instead of writing what you've written
you should appear on stage
and flip a lightswitch
a hundred times until everyone
sees green and magenta circles
blipping in front of their eyes,
now that would be a poem.

But evidently I'm in Minnesota
and we have taken a vow,
and we'll say no more of this for now.

Prayer for Money ²⁵⁷

To the extent that it is educational to suffer,
And there are lessons you wanted to teach,
God, we get it.

If we have sneered from our own security
that others aren't trying hard enough,
forgive us.

We are reduced in our fear
to being grateful that they are hurting
and not us.

You are lord and commander of tides.
Wash something in our direction,
we pray.

Build tolerance in us for one another
And confidence to write a check
and start things.

Build patience in us awaiting opportunity,
That we not step on our neighbor's face
for a penny.

Call an end to this lusterless season.
Send rain by the ocean and wash away
our fears.

257 You (2002)

The Soul Flies Straight to God 258

Think only of naps
and salutes to the sun
and you mistake
the deeper ambition.

It is saving up fire
like a crack gone cold
hoarding its energies
for a single exertion.

Hang heads who thought
there was no flight
and gravity is destiny,
that old age clips gray wings.

Behold one ancient angel
Tripping down stone steps,
leaping into the arms
of the faithful beloved.

The Wonder Was

She peered into the mirror
And wondered what the world saw
That she could not

It could size her up immediately
As unworthy of investment.
Efficient for them but perplexing for her.

Was it a look of stupidity,
Or was there a curse one could read
In the turbine of the eye,

A signal no grass would grow on this dirt,
In a moment they saw what she could not see
If she stood on tiptoe a hundred thousand years.

Mobile Greek Chorus

Radio dispatched, they can be on hand
to minister to every moment of panic

They know somehow what is in your heart
and what must be weighed against what

Sympathetic to you, but also mindful
of the needs of the larger community

Should you act out of rage or selfish desire,
that might be it for Denmark

They explain what the hero cannot
Because they have the common touch

Still the megaphones seem a bit much

When They Die 259

The mother makes you weep
because all mothers are Greek
and they do not know
but they suffer so

The father makes you sigh
because of all that never was
Fathers are foolishness given a voice
that then has nothing to say

A son would be like being smitten
by a smith, hit on the head
like nothing could be, pray God
could never be

But a daughter is the end
it is the man turned inside out
his soul become a flower
his only shot at beauty

God's Failures 260

What if this is the best he can do
he's like an airline that keeps losing luggage
or the Army Corps showing up late
after the levees have broken
snapping his fingers
I've fucked up again

What if his heart is in the right place
but he's just an idiot
he can't help it
he keeps losing his car keys
and poking his eye with his umbrella

What if we've been covering for him
out of kindness all this while
when what he really needs is
accountability
his holy feet held over the fire

Fountain Pen Poem

When I folded it,
A shadow copy appeared,

the message of mystery
you always want to write

that could mean anything or nothing
and slanted in the wrong direction

like a sentence that doesn't know fear.



The Secret

knowing there is one
makes everything awkward

we're all supposed to know it
but no one's allowed to say

what it is, still there's
all this nodding

The Soul Does Not Know It Is Dying ²⁶¹

until very late
until then every day is a day
every step is the way forward
no worries and no regrets

it is only toward the end
that it withdraws so as not
to be a bother, and there may
be a moment of perplexity

why aren't I able to do this

but it is a question asked
as if from afar
because night is coming
then glorious day

261 DOG As a Metaphor for the Soul (2008)

Blow 262

We are fluff that has been blown on,
We part company with one another
And float into the aloneness.
We wander so long
Borne aloft by breath, aching
To see one another again
Yearning to be stitched together at the foot
And it is like that until one day we come to rest
And realize that we carried the secret
Inside us all along, that we arise
From the core of a golden sun
And the day of blooming
Has been gathering inside
The whole while

Pet and Peasant 263

He has no identity
except for the property
he lives on, hence the name.

When the land goes,
he know he goes, too.
It's always the same.

How many times
the master confessed crimes
he could not help committing.

The old resident confides
He had no real choice,
there was never any quitting.

Govinda and the Park Policeman 264

The enlightened one and a disciple walked down a mountain road
to sit at the foot of the cascading waters
that were famous in that province.

And it was here at this waterfall that he understood
For the first time the poured-outness of God
Into the world of nature, how divinity infuses itself
In the commonest things, the splash of a trout
Or an insect's buzz in the hollow of one's ear.
And when his meditation was complete.

The two climbed back up the mountainside,
Where a park ranger was issuing them a citation.
What is the matter, officer? he asked.

You park registration is good for sixty minutes
But you have been here for almost an hour and a half.
I see, said the compassionate Buddha. But you know,
We were praying by the waterfall and lost all sense of time.

That may very well be, the ranger said, but it's not honest
To pay for sixty minutes, then try to get away with ninety.
I assure you, officer, I had no intention of deceiving.

But as you can see, I am but an old monk,
And these legs are not so fast at climbing steep hills
As my young companion's.

Then you should have paid for three hours, said the ranger.
Perhaps you should put a meter on the waterfall,
So people can deposit their money directly, said the disciple,
Who was red-faced with irritation.

Peace, my son, said Govinda. Indulging in sarcasm
Solves no problem, and creates many.

Besides, this good man is merely doing his job.
Write him a check then for the full amount,
But mark on the memo line:

"A tax on illumination."

Pond 265

I see trees on the far shore mirrored in a pool
And below the trees the shimmer of cloud.
Below the cloud the reeds bow heads.
Behind, the shadows lengthening.

The skin on the water ripples with breeze
Like puff of breath on cup of tea.
Now cloud now electricity now stillness.
Now water-beetle steadfastly rows.
The shifting shape of trout.

It is like thinking about thinking
And then thinking about that.
It is leaf and water and heron craning.
It is shining and subtle and lovely and wet
And impossibly intelligent.

Uncheated

There is a single day in Minnesota in April
when everything happens at once
the grass, the flowers, the leaves, the sky
and if you are not out that day
or if you are not paying attention
to what is happening around you
you will feel cheated by the world
you will feel that winter made the handoff
to spring and you were somewhere else
and you will wonder what was the good
of all that longing and how did
the air turn kind and sweet again
when you were about your business

The Orchard 266 *

My family's home in the Firelands in Ohio in the '50s
had about fifty apple and a dozen cherry trees.
In the spring the blossoms would roll through in waves,
the cherries first, followed by the white apples,
then the rose colored apple blossoms, like tied tufts of crepe,
kleenex blossoms on wires, until the orchard
was a carpet of apple shag almost lilac in color
and the crabapple trees whose rusty dots
planted cinnamon in the air.

266 The Orchard, 2009

* This poem was published as an art book by Richard Stephens' Supersession Press in 2009 – the week of my daughter's death, as I recall. Only 63 copies exist, and they cost \$125 or so. The poem reminds me of 'A Child's Christmas in Wales' – a wry remembering of growing up in Amherst, Ohio. It is possible to view a copy of the book [at this link](#).

The trees were only 20 feet tall, perfect for kid climbing.
We swayed in them for hours on summer afternoons,
gnawing the first bitter beads, nodding at this year's flavor, it was
the ideal moment, before the worms invaded.
Because we were small we could climb to the highest twigs
and the wind would hold us up there, heads poking
through the canopy, gazing out over the flapping leaves.
I made a tree fort around the trunk of one
out of stolen plywood and ceramic tiles, I would sit in it by day
and sketch blueprints in a spiral notebook.

I slept in it a few times, and drew up plans to include my friends
in, like a university where we would
tell one another what we had read in books,
about dinosaurs and what kinds of clouds there were.
I planned to buy a sprayer and a bottle of malathion
and hook it up to a hose and advance through the orchard
dealing death to parasites and life to the fruit,
hose away the scaly mites and red cedar worms
that riddled the sweet green meat.

And my brother could maybe tell us about the Civil War,
He read the thickest books on our couch, like Sinai stones
and us boys would all be professors, trading wisdom
by the boysenberry bramble where the Queen Anne's lace
teased the butterflies and last year's lost baseballs lingered
underfoot, the color of beaten weeds. When the apples were of a
suitable size we used them as baseballs,
smashing one after another with Louisville Sluggers
till they wept furious milk, high over the monkeyball trees
and into the murk of the chugging swamp.

A giant St. Bernard named Topper, who belonged to the landlord,
sometimes lumbered through, jowls dripping,
a dazed, mortal look on its face, like the Cid mounted up
for one last ride, and we would drop our bats
and run into the barn, and hide in the cornrick
till Topper had passed, unaware of his harmlessness.
We mounted a basketball hoop on the side of the barn,
and used to play PIG and HORSE and other animal games.
We had nothing else to do, we played AMOEBA
And CORNBORE and SMUT.

Sometimes my brother would stand on one side of the barn, and me on the other, and we would throw a football over the roof to each other. You couldn't tell where it would appear as it crossed the roofline, and the ball seemed to pop into reality there, like a sword held up by a supernatural hand from an anodized water trough. There was a corn grinder we used to stuff ears of hard dented corn into, and the cobs would pop out the end, shiny and red and clean, like a basket of fresh pulled teeth. Then one day the barn caught fire and burned.

My dad ordered us to mow the yard, but the mower
was self-driven and we could not control it as it skidded
over the fallen apples, swerving and sawing,
scalped the fallen apples with its blades, and sprayed the slash
around our ankles while we pushed, and yellow jackets
would sneak into our pantlegs and sting us good.
The rest of the time the machine didn't run, and our dad
would hike up his pants and prostrate himself on the slab
peering up at the glass gas-ball, emory board the sparkplug gap,
and crank the cord, but that mower would never start,
Patrick and I had broken it with our minds.

And in the fall the rotting apples blanketed the yard,
bumpy and squishy and brown, and the whole world smelled like
cider and we had to rake them into piles
with garden rakes, and the apples stuck on the tines of the rake,
and we'd stop and pluck them off every half minute.
Then we set the piles of knobby apples on fire
and the sweet stink of roasting mash would swamp the
neighborhood, and somewhere the muskrats and possums and
raccoons that we knew only as furtive figures
humping across dirt roads at night stood up, sniffed
the evening air and took notice.

At the heart of the orchard stood a pyramid of railroad ties,
dripping creosote, that we played King of the Mountain on,
but gingerly, because the ties were always giving way,
and wolf spiders made their home in among the tarry beams.
And when Mr. Thomas bulldozed the orchard lot and built a tract
home where my tree fort had been, the new neighbors used the
beams as rifle targets, and you could hear the bullets slitting
through the leaves sometimes, and it wasn't safe
to wander over that way any more, and we were getting older
anyway.

But a part of me still bundled up after snowfalls and legged it down to where the creek trickled through the trees, and thundered through the thin new ice in my rubber galoshes.

Then in the spring, when the blossoms once again lit up the remaining patch of trees, I would wonder if this was the year to spray, and stop the cedar scabbing, rout out the inevitable worms, put red fruit on the table in a painted bowl and earn our childhood finally, by acting decisively, consciously, with purpose and poise, like good kids, but other things happened, and we didn't.

Hopscotch 267

This is an experience I had the week of Daniele's funeral. Like many other important moments that week, this one occurred at Hidden Falls in St. Paul. I was in an ultimate crisis of meaning that morning, when suddenly everything I saw seemed to fit together ecstatically. All the creatures I saw seemed to be saying something to me, something about humility that permitted them to be courageous. It was a moment of astonishing, outrageous friendship.

I knew in an instant
she was there and there and there²⁶⁸

The being small, under radar
where love clambers in the umber²⁶⁹

We take turns like merlins²⁷⁰
putting on other creatures

No membranes, no padlocks
to hinder the leaping

The mole makes castles underfoot
Crane sharpens bill on a log

A duck cannot fly without flapping
Mosquito kisses explode in the air

And suddenly everything
waves hands and says hi

267 Desalinization (2010)

268 She: Daniele's spirit, where she had disappeared to. I knew she was not a duck, but she was speaking to me as one.

269 Being a jerk here. Love clambering in the umber is like, spirit moving through shadow. I just liked the "-mber" sound, like the end of the month.

270 A merlin is an owl, but this also applies to T. H. White's *The Once and Future King*, in which the wizard Merlin schools Arthur in the ways of wild creatures.

Glory ²⁷¹

Losers
is what we are
because there is nothing
that will not depart
Every tooth will come out
every hair will blow away
every drop of blood
scab up
and flake away
Every thought
you ever had
Every child
you ever held
Every smile
will fade
in the end
And the hardest thing
is being grateful
for every loss
and every death
because what
you do not lose
you did not
have
and what you did
not have
you never
knew.

Prayer for Refuge ²⁷²

God save me from salesmen
and preachers in denim.

From long conversations
with etherized patients.

From boredom in the afternoon
And the smell of cheap perfume.

Shield me from the words
and consequences I deserve.

Maintain a sense of possibility
Put turbined slippers on my feet.

So at a moment's notice I can flee
From lolling tongues to thee.

272 You (2002)

Bad Neighbor 273

He moved in after dark
and I never saw his face.
Now I hear him moving
furniture around.

At night when I lay awake
He's banging out 'Honolulu Baby'
On his ukulele,
I swear it's the only song he knows

And he hasn't got a pretty voice
And every ten minutes I hear him
Crack open a beer, and ten minutes later
Roll the empty across the floor.

I don't know what the hell he's cooking –
Cabbage and licorice casserole? –
But the smell suspends for days and days,
Like he's hanging it up there on a line,

He is always at the door,
A cup of sugar, I don't know,
Maybe he's lonely and wants to talk,
Still I hide behind the drapes

Until the knocking stops
And his footfalls dwindle in the hall.
I wish he would pack up and move
And take that face I dare not see

But I've gotten to the point
I don't think I can live
Without him any more.

Le Train Envers 274

(The wrong train)

You watch the board with the flipping
numbers
And suddenly it is your train and
you race
To the gate, dragging your suitcase
behind you
And you find the last car and you climb
up the steps
And collapse in your seat as the train
pulls out.
For an hour all is well, the countryside
Clicking by you.
Then you are in Poitiers and the train
starts to slow
And you are seized with fear because you are
on express to Paris,
There should be no stops – the horror
hits you.
You have boarded the
wrong train.
You glance about at the other
passengers.
How lucky they seem, to be going where
they are going,
And not having to call Jean-Paul in the night
and say
Come get me, dear cousin, I'm in Brussels,
I think.

Cathedral Bathroom Graffiti

In the basement,
under the great gray dome,
people squat and write
on the toilet wall.
'I was here, ' L.M. scratched in 1995.
Someone transposed an H and an I,
which I think means Jesus,
and he wrote it several times.
Someone just wrote the initials I.D.O.
which meant something to him
but not to me.
Bob '57 wrote: 'Let the sunshine in, '
a quote from a nude musical.
And someone in that dank room
with the too-thin paper wrote
'Miracles do happen'
with his Sharpie.

Dime 275

One day I learned I was wrong all my life
Offended by lightness and wary of cheer
And the only music my ear respected,
The groan of the soon-to-be-dead.

Then did I see how far down-mountain
I was and what hard climb lay ahead.
But does one undertake such journey
With high purpose and fanfare

Or better, plant foot as if nothing
Much matters, as if birds migrating
Have nowhere to get to, and matters
Of life and excruciating death

Are resolved by the flip of a coin.

Bathtime 276

You could be Fabio and still
look silly in the bath.
It is unmasculine to recline
in soapy water and relax.

Bobbing through the foam
at the center of your self
is the bobbin of the penis
a buoy in a sudsy gulf.

Periscope, sea monster,
bearded triton of the tub,
bishop with a face only
mother superior could love,

These ancient ablutions
prepare us for bed.
Tuck in the little one
and kiss him on the head.

Desert Contractors

They rise early at the Motel 6
in Twenty Nine Palms
and the parking lot empties
in minutes

They lug giant insulated lunchboxes
down to their trucks and utility vans.

First light is peeking over Mount Ryan
and I see one of them
standing on the bed of his pickup.

He is wearing an orange safety vest
and he seems almost to be saluting the sun
chugging a quart of whole milk.

Fools Unlimited ²⁷⁷

God is the reason we all go crazy
begging scraps at every doorbell

Why we wear diapers cut from the funnies
duct-taped and leaking at the fold

We embrace the people who betray us
and we bless their bratty descents

The taste of vomit is always in the mouth
And it is not even always our own

Confess to crimes we didn't commit
Love Limbaugh and Gingrich and Jones

Abandon critical thought forthwith
Your intellect was never your friend

A woman with crossed arms demands to know
what happens now and who is to blame

And the answer is always yes, of course
the voices made us do it, again

277 The Rapture (2009)

Opportunity

Logically the caterpillar
would chew the leaf forever

But then the tumbler clicks inside
and worm begins spinning its tomb

How afraid we would be
to seal ourselves in like that

Until all light is gone
And there is no leaf to eat

And all movement ceases
And we tremble in the dark

Critique

I slapped the man's manuscript in my hand.

“The truth is, your work is almost entirely masturbatory.”

He clasped me by the shoulders and gazed into my eyes.

“Finally, someone understands!”



'Abandon'

As a noun it can be
a wonderful thing
a severing of restrictions
a tossing off,
'She gave herself to total abandon.'

As a verb it is to be avoided
a father driving west
away from his kids,
a baby making fists in a basket
'When she most needed you
was when you abandoned her.'

Only occasionally
it cuts a fresh groove.
'We abandoned that way of thinking
as destructive.'
'She abandoned all claims
and went forward.'

Les Cryptoportiques ²⁷⁸

(a subterranean market in Arles, built during Roman times)

These are the stations of the scourge
the pillar where the spirit spurts

The cathedral embedded in the mine
has been silent now for some time

The cobblestones are always damp
From the place where stalagmites stand

There the cockroach Orson Welles
scrambles over a hill of shells

There the bazaar of shiny foil
lamps sputtering their last drops of oil

Dank as the dungeon and damp as a cave
No swinging ball of lead can raze

There the architect led on a leash
Drawn into darkness like a beast

There the hippodrome's flaking hoar
and sawdust and horse piss and hair

There is your empire, sunken and gone
It ripples like a pebble in your palm

278 Cartes Postales (2008)

Poets Ruin Everything 279

A roomful is like a guild meeting of the gods
And they are petty, jealous ones.

If they are friendly they are unctuous and you wonder
What they want from you, perhaps the sense
that they are not really very good
But with a little politicking with you they might be
admitted to the inner ring
And thus avoid the death of being bad,
and the embarrassment of having thought otherwise.
In any event they seem nice but you dare not believe them
For they are peddling wax fruit from the back of a truck.

If they are unfriendly it is because they are intimidated
by everyone
Except the people they are able to intimidate,
and they are always trying
To decrease the first group by increasing the second one.
They are bullies plain and simple but they do it
with attitude
instead of muscle.
The work no longer matters to them,
just who is in and who is out, and what explanation
they can concoct for being out themselves.
A good excuse is better than a poem;
in fact that is the kind of poem they write, and
some are pretty good.

The worst are those who turn you into a member
of the unfriendly group
because they write a brand of inoffensive and sincere verse
that ordinary people sitting in the front rows get,
and these simple thoughts vault them to the head of the pack,
and their poems appear in the more coveted magazines,
and then you are the jealous one and obliged to loathe yourself,
but at least you did not sneer at them at parties or call them names

or if you did they were merely passive expressions.

"I couldn't wait to hear more of your work."

"When I read your poems I want to close the book and just be."

And then there are the others, you can't describe them
because you never see them.

You don't know how much they drink or if they know
their kids' names or if they worship Pan in a laurel grove
because they keep their heads down, and when you
read a poem by them

you feel your intestines knot because it is the real thing
and you want to break into their houses at night
and rifle their cupboards and bag up their secrets
and then you would be as clean as them,
but it's no good, because they're too good,
they aren't even aware that there's a competition,
they seem plugged into some whole other thing
and anyway you don't know where they live.

God Told Me to Tell You To Cut Your Hair ²⁸⁰

(for a friend afflicted with sexual compulsivity)

God told me to tell you to get a haircut.
Here's how he explained it:

Long hair is a sign of defiance.
Long hair is a sign of androgyny.
Long hair is a sign of childhood.

Samson had long hair,
but he was proud and he lost it
and had to go from pillar to post to reclaim it.

Jesus had long hair.
And you're not him.

Your sign is the sign of the Leatherneck.
Get a Marine cut, down to the nub.

Signal subtly to everyone who meets you
that you are a different guy.
No longer windblown and endlessly complex
but simple as the stubble on your scalp.

Then, be that guy. In three and a half weeks,
go get another haircut.
Don't let it grow back ever again.

If people ask you about the new look,
sneer and say, 'I'm on a mission from God.'
Every time you look in the mirror, think:

"I am a Marine. I do the dirty work.
I do what I'm told. I don't have a brain.
I have give everything away,

280 Midnight at the Mounds (2004)

and I don't take anything back.”

Shame is for sissies and you
Are a natural killer



Lines Written the Morning of the Funeral

281

THE GLUTTON

The caterpillar had eaten all the leaves on the bough.
You pig, said the sparrow, you are killing the tree.
How am I supposed to know, the caterpillar cried,
can't you see I don't have eyes.

THE CIGARETTE BUTT

I have ambitious aspirations
the cigarette butt announced.

The toadstool said to him,
I don't think that's very practical

THE FOUNTAIN

Families come from all over
and spread their blankets on the grass

The fountain is predictable
every forty minutes it goes off
and sprays like a carousel
of rinstones

Mommy look, a boy says,
I tasted it, it's salty –
and kind of greasy.

Mother kleenexes a smudge
from his cheek,
Don't you know it's
a fountain of tears?

THE CAST-IRON SKILLETS

God says, I need you to do something for me
and hands you two-red hot frying pans.
Twenty years later you run into him again.
He says, are you still holding those things?
Hey, you can set one of them down.

THE MAN WITH NO ARMS AND NO LEGS

A man with no arms and no legs
is grinning ear to ear.

What have you got to be cheerful about
he is asked.

I like how the light is playing on my face
I have a feeling it's my lucky day

THE MIRACLE

The man in bad straits had prayed for a miracle
and a jumbo jet landed on his house

THE MAN MADE OUT OF GLASS WHO KEEPS BREAKING

Every motion he makes
some new part breaks off

first a finger
then a hand

He wonders whose blood that is
forming on the edge

He keeps breaking and breaking
without losing mass

The spit bubbles
between his lips

Why doesn't someone say
stop stumbling about like a dope

All this pointless breathing
and acting surprised

He is an item of scientific interest
Making rainbows out of prisms

Don't love me he says
it's unsafe when I shatter

THE CHORD

See how lifting one finger
changes everything

A door opens, something
new and unidentified is there

Do you hear it?
Do you hear?

The Weather 282

The day of the death it began to drizzle
and people arrived at the door stamping their feet
to be rid of the wet.

It had hardly rained all summer.

An hour before the funeral the sun came out
and a soft breeze arose from the west.
People took off their jackets
and hung them on the backs of chairs.

In the middle of the night on Tuesday
the heaving thunder woke us up.
We ran through the house
lowering windows.

Then stood on the porch
as the rain came down,
rain by the oceanful,
pounding the boulevard,

blasting the neighborhood,
choking the gutters,
running and rushing
to rejoin the river.

Why Seek You Him Here? 283

Why look for him in prayer
God is not there

you can't place a local call
to the All-In-All

Not responding to anyone,
why, that's half the fun

He has gone into his father's house
He's got no time for the likes of us

Too busy creating fresh wounds
to manage old accounts

Best look for him in jail
picking his teeth with a nail

Better, look where no one looks
and not in books

What She Would Say

Each time I see you sad
I feel worse inside

I wish you could see
I just had a bad day

I'm sorry it hurt you
But I was hurting too.

Time to kick out the chocks
And let me roll free

The Search Goes On

I'm looking for something
in the eyes of people I meet nightly.
if I turn and walk away
it's because you didn't have anything to say
or held onto it too tightly.

A Monk at the Door 284

One summer morning the doorbell woke me.
When I opened the door, there was a man in a Tibetan robe,
wearing Buddy Holly frames.
He was a chaplain from the Minneapolis Police Department.
He read from a piece of paper in his hand.
He told me that my daughter had been found dead in her room.
Then I had to tell my wife.
Rachel, a man downstairs ...
says Daniele ...
has died.

This really happened.
It was August 18, 2009.

Within moments of hearing my daughter was dead,
God died, too.
I had put all my trust in his faithfulness.
I knew we were on a journey, a journey I could not understand.
But I trusted God to see us through.
I prayed every day for protection for Daniele,
from the dangers that surrounded her life.
And so God began to shrink, to collapse to a dot.
I could see him disappearing into air.
I could hear his tiny voice calling out: goodbye.

The day of the funeral, a beautiful hawk perched
on our backyard lines.
A dozen people looked up as it surveyed us, shrugged,
and flew away over the garage.

Sometimes in the fall, down by the river bluffs, I see eagles.
And herons. And ducks.
Always, a curious sensation that they are not just birds,
they are messengers somehow.
Here I am, they are saying. I am here.
I am everywhere.

Winter was hard. Rachel went away.
Friends stopped calling.
They were sick of my stories.
I sat and watched the satellite and I drank.

Sometimes I was so angry I would argue all day,
with the people who no longer called.
Behind their backs I told them the truth to their faces.

Spring came, the trees leafed out and blossomed.
One day I heard a tapping in the dining room.
A robin had returned and flown in the back door,
and now was leaping over and over again
into the same sealed window.
The bird was frantic, afraid and exhausted.
I fetched a plastic Walmart bag from the pantry
and slipped it over the frightened bird.
As gently as I could I placed the bag
on an open planter in the back yard.
The bird sat paralyzed, unblinking, one wing cocked awry.
I left the bag and bird alone, and when I returned minutes later,
the bag was empty ...
the bird was gone.

And for the first time I found myself wondering
about something ...
If God was truly gone ...
if nothing mattered and the universe wasn't just
a snide joke at the expense of the conscious ...
then why was that man on the porch,
with the stubbly scalp and the stubbly chin
and the stammering affect ...
and why was he wearing saffron robes?

And why has that color ...
the color of the embalmed body,
but also the sign of surprise
been everywhere I look?

The Upset Sea 285

Weather reports said it would get heavy
but it still came on fast.
By noon the sea was rolling,
10 foot swells that pitched the boat repeatedly
into the next wall of water,
forcing people to huddle in the cabin
and glance about with worried expressions.
The newlywed couple in front of us were sick
she lovely in the face and eyes,
he a little drunk and full
from two too many cinnamon rolls.
So when he hove all over her,
the pitch of the boat was such that
it dripped down off her and onto the floor,
including my backpack beside her,
until it was swimming in chowder,
Meanwhile the boat was rocking and rolling
and I was torn mentally between
thoughts of the craft's capsizing
and thoughts that that might rinse the backpack clean.

A small young woman from the excursion company
stepped forward, miraculously able to right herself,
and began to press the woman with paper napkins,
the brown nonabsorbent kind you find in lavatories.
Still she knelt like Magdalene in the typhoon
to daub the shaken woman's sweater and jeans,
then led the two back to the bow
where the pitching was minimal.
She staggered back to see if I wanted to empty
the pack and she would hose it down.
Ashamed by her graciousness, I nodded.
She offered me gloves but I said no,
I was once a dad and waded through worse than this.

The boat continued to pitch and yaw

and the newlywed woman returned, boyfriendless,
to stare sullenly out the window.
But when we ducked back into the inlet,
away from the raging sea, she rose and rejoined him
at the gangplank, where they kissed and smiled,
but remained stationed for a quick getaway,
wanting to face people no more.

"I want to thank you for your positive attitude,"
said the brave young boatswain,
whom I wanted as a daughter.
"And you for your courtesy," I replied,
sorry I would never see her again.

And as Rachel and I walked safely ashore,
I lifted the backpack to smell.
It was all there, my computer, my wallet,
my cellphone, my journal, my books,
and mixed in with it all, the sea itself,
plus raging stomach juices, plus the faintest hint
of cinnamon.

Calving 286

The toe of the Northwestern Glacier
is blue as a bubble gum snow-cone.

It is the way light refracts under the pressure
of a million tons of freezing and grinding.

Still it looks stunningly wrong,
as if someone has spray-painted a mountain.

The passengers on the excursion boat
crowd around the railing, snapping and popping.

"It was much more spectacular last year,"
complains a woman holding her hat on.

The boat has quieted, we are to sit here
until something "calves" and slips into the sea.

An Indian woman with a bright red bindi
steps back into the cabin giggling: "It is too cold!"

The boat bobs gently, we all stare intently.
Several minor fallings occur, and the ice and snow

crumbles into the cold fjord waters,
"That chip hasn't budged all summer,"

said the first mate, of a 10-story chunk
that is skronking away from the main.

A knucklehead, standing by the bar
turns from the view just long enough to say,

"Maybe if we used some dynamite," hyuk-hyuk,
and that is when the ice-pin chose to fall

and down it slides with a cracking sound
as if the entire ocean had broken,

150 feet high, surrendering, like a fat lady
in a burning building letting go

and tumbling into the big blue net,
and the wave it made rose higher than the boat

and soon we are the chip rocking in its wake.
Everyone feels an enormous release

and is enormously pleased.
We have seen a mountain fall into the sea

and we need to get with our day.
"Dang," says Goofy, "I shouldna looked away.

It doesn't bother anyone that each calf
pushed out of the glacier's haunch

happens further up the hill.
So the captain starts puttering away,

the only witness to our great good fortune
a harbor seal plopped up behind us,

like a minstrel smacking his whiskered lips.
and in an English actor's voice intones

"They took to the sea, but the sea loved them not
and spat them back upon the shore."

For Sale

(card pinned to the Nungalvik Hotel corkboard)

Woman's diamond ring

\$400, firm

Fits up to size 10

Never worn

Must see to appreciate



The Rain Will Come 287

When the stain sets and sinks into the cloth
on a rag on a post on a gravelly hill
where the ants march steady in the crimson clay
The rain will come and wash it away

When there is too much to bear
and you have worn out prayer
And there is some thing that needs to be gone
the rain will come and wear it down

Though no one you know will understand
something hard to comprehend
though faith is dead and odd is even
the rain will come and rinse it clean

When the gouge is deep and the hole erodes
and scoured hollow by a stone
and the universe is empty as a sin
the rain will come again and fill it in

When you have given up for good
And you tried everything you could
And you made arrangements with the pain
And the worm has burrowed lengthwise through the brain

The rain will come and start to fall again

Relationship ²⁸⁸

God mops
the last breath
away
with a cloth

The Soul's Analogy 289

The soul is to its body
as a worker to the farm

The soul wants to please
and it wants to be retained,

not get let go into the cold
to lick the frozen bowl

it wants a good relationship
and will work to maintain it

it is willing to learn and to adapt
but it has its limits, too

just to be there, and to breathe
your fart air is heaven to hm

problem is the soul is made
of muscle and fur, it is real

while the body seeks limited liability
for the day it sends the soul away,

the body cannot stem corruption
because it is just a corporation

289 DOG As a Metaphor for the Soul (2008)

The Soul Does Not Countenance Tragedy

290

The soul does not countenance tragedy
It knows how little there is at stake

if its tail caught fire and burned it down
Life is life, and if a switch gets flipped

then you go on with something else.
The world doesn't value individuals

You inhale, you exhale,
the smile need never leave your lips.

Even if you vanish in your sleep,
whatever's next must be some kind of gift.

Hand

Sometimes it is just a gesture
that changes things,
the opening and the sweep of the hand,
which seems grandiose in one sense,
“See all that I am inviting you to,”
and humble in another,
“This is the paw of a creature like yourself.”
And if the hand should be a well-used one,
one that has been frozen, shaken,
knitted, soiled, refused, all the better.
It opens, it invites,
and you follow.

Two Single Mothers At the Anchorage Airport ²⁹¹

One brings her three daughters
holding hands in a line,
to the counter.
All four are beautiful,
but the oldest, perhaps 13, is different.
She walks flatfooted, open-mouthed,
pulling at her mom.
But when she reaches the check-in,
she cocks her head and moans.
The mother shows no embarrassment,
she does not hiss harsh words.
She holds her daughter back,
with dignity and love.

The other mother might weigh 85 pounds,
and her son, 12, glances at the other passengers
with a suspicious scowl.
He too is small, a twig from her branch,
and you see he will never be big
so he is learning to be tough instead.
There is no mercy in his eyes.
But now it's time for breakfast,
and the twig-woman takes him by the hand
and leads him off to McDonalds,
and the tough customer
looks up at his mother
and beams.

Forgiving God

It is the hardest thing to do
because when he fails he really fails
and of everyone who really lets you down
he lets you down the hardest
and of everyone who let you down
he should have known better
and how destructive the failure would be –
no one who trusted before
will trust again so much.
His failures twist souls,
kill churches, feed the bitterness
that bitterness craves,
so that there is more failure,
more failure, more.

He is sorry, God knows
he is sorry and what can he say,
that he'll make it up to you,
like a missed call on an outside pitch,
it can be swapped with another pitch later?
No, people die, faith dies, love dies
when God fucks up
and he wears the memory like a wooden plate
tied round his neck with string.
So many plates, so many strings
you can hear him far off, coming.

So how do you go forward when you
have all power and he has none?
First appreciate the irony.
Then do the thing he would have done
in a more competent age,
and set him a task that has nothing
to do with you or his most recent error –
bring word from a long lost friend,
let you witness love without being involved.

Let you see kindness with your own eyes,
kindness of the kind that smashes rocks
and contradicts credulity.

And as always, look for the sign
of his handiwork, a surprise
you could not have included
in the instructions, some happy extra
thrown on to the task.
Then you know he is on the job
and stimulated.

Extract no promises, God has no compass
to keep him aright, it is
one step at a time for him, the same
as me and you.
And start saving, now, for the next big
fuck-up, because
God is let loose on the unaware world
and anything can happen.

At Swanson Lake 292

Little Cora floated in an inner tube,
butt poking through,
and footy-paddled into the reeds.
When she emerged she was covered
with a hundred black leeches.
Her sisters screamed and would not help,
the mother and brother knelt and began to pick them off
but the young were so small
that when you picked them from a toenail
they squiggled under your fingernail.
Finally the two got to the bathing suit
and the brother began to cry and ran away
because up one sat the mother of the brood,
bigger around than a tricycle tire
so the mom made several forays
to fetch her out, she wished there
were a tool that could pluck monster leeches
from little girls' hineys
but there was only her fingers that could not get a grip
on the slithery thing
and when she finally grasped it around the middle and
tugged it out, making a schlocking sound
and Cora cried with all her might
and stood on the sand,
naked, suckered, and blinking
on the sand.

Bore Tide 293

The estuary at the end of Cook Inlet,
Turnagain Arm,
gets its name
from the same Captain Bligh we read about
in Mutiny on the Bounty,
the one who rowed across the Pacific,
and who evidently thought this way was very bendy, "turn again."
Aye, Captain Bligh.

But what makes this bay amazing
is something called the bore tide
which only takes place in a couple of places in the world,
where the high tide is much, much higher than the low,
so that when the tide comes in and as the ocean
pours into the funnel of the bay,
the passageway begins to roar
and the water churns like a hyperactive river,
only this river goes upstream instead of down,
and the mud at the bottom is stirred like a blender,
till the color is the color of chocolate milk
and the winds, coming from the opposite direction,
blowing down through the Chugach Range,
are impossible to walk into.

I saw a man watch his daughter fly out of his arms
and back into the front seat of his car,
I saw a man with blueberry yogurt
splattered all over his face,
I saw brave strong men walk into the wind like mimes,
pantlegs flapping furiously, posture diagonal.

And then ...
when the tide goes out ...

and the winds die down,
the inlet bottom reveals its treasure,
huge cube-shaped rocks, as big as Econoline vans,
called *erratics*, because they do not quite belong there,
they were thrown a mile from the mountains
that formed them, and belched across the bay,
and then eroded from the adjoining cliffs,
deposited by glaciers 50,000 years ago or more,
they lie at rest on the furious ocean floor,
Like giant foam dice,
they know their secret combinations,
and they know that what is there one moment
can easily be hidden from view in the next,
and they wink their mystery
to the world.

Mystery Girl

She could be so sweet and brave
but yet so afraid,

wonderfully vulgar
but not much of a divulger

alive with laughter
and then thoughtful after

But when she went black
there was no going back

Baby, how did you do this thing
And what was God thinking

Bloop ²⁹⁴

Lips pursed,
the fish in the bowl
stares goggle-eyed out
of its tank.

It forms one perfect bubble,
inside which is nested a single syllable,
which asks one simple question –

Why?
Why?
What did I do?

Everything Dies **But Nothing Goes Away**

In Kotzebue there is no recycling program.
No one wants what this small city far away to the north
throws away.
It's too expensive to go after their shit for the small savings of
reprocessing it.
A crusher would cost a million plus
and everything would still have to be sorted
and separated.
You think of the melting glaciers
and you think of the energy that went into everything
that is visible everywhere.
No one pays the gas to have it sent to a landfill
put on a barge to be chopped up and reused
And it's not just the pop cans, it's everything.
And so the front yards fill up, with everything
people have used –
the cars that no longer run,
the freezers that stopped freezing,
the broken toilets, the ravaged boats,
old air conditioners, rusted grills ,
the splintered plywood ramps
used by skateboarders to get lift
from the pull of the tundra.
bicycles, snow-gos, barrows, storage containers,
chainsawed doghouses,
shipping containers as big as a house,
cement mixers that ground to a halt.
I saw industrial equipment
I can never identify,
great hulking iron things with fans and flanges
and levers that once did something powerful
but now can only sit
In front of a log cabin I saw a broken treadmill
labeled "Endurance."

I saw four school lockers, leaning side by side
against a wall, their yellow paint flaking
in the subzero cold.

And up on the tar-paper roofs of these caved-in houses,
the racks of moose and caribou,
skulls still connected, vegetarian teeth bared
to the cold, the trophies of long-ago hunts.
And sits on their lawns forever,
I don't mean lawns, because there is no grass,
it sits on their property,
it gives away their secrets,
it's a 3D photo album, shot to scale,
it's the story of their lives
standing around doing nothing.

A part of me says how wasteful.

A part of me says what a mess.

But it teaches us a lesson.

it teaches you that everything we make
takes up space.

We who ship everything off to the dump
have convinced ourselves we are tidy people
when somewhere a half dozen zip codes away
a landfill is groaning from our excesses.

And we look at these people of the north
and wring our noses

like they are the slobs and we are the civilized ones
while our shit is packed off to trouble some people
in China, in Mexico, or under some mountain
in Nevada,

Or it leeches into our own water substrate
and we wonder why our SAT scores are dropping.

It's a filthy-ass world however you shave it
so why not keep the bones above ground, to see?

And that's what they do, in Kotzebue –
the permafrost prevents deep graves,
as if the earth is saying. oh no you don't,

you can't stick that slop in me,
so you lay them atop of it instead,
you heap a mound of stones and gravel
over the suck-mouth ancestors
and the beautiful girls in beaded fur parkas,
you strew plastic flowers on the sea-washed stones
flowers that fade from the cold and the blinding sun,
and say this was our life,
we cannot tell a lie,
and even if we could,
the earth would not allow it.

We honor our ancestors because they brought us to this place
they set us on this path
and even if it is not a path that anyone wants to steal
we cling to it because it is ours.
These people lived in valor in a hard place
and they never complained
and their successes are measured day to day
by the children they bore,
and the children that survived,
and they will never be junk to us because though they have passed
on
they are our hope
because they gave us us,
and the most beautiful thing is when it snows
and the snow comes down and covers everything,
and we are all together finally, the way we really are,
and the junk disappears under the clean new coat,
and the dead sit up in their resting places and smile
and holdout their hands to catch the snow,
it is proof that things go on
it is proof we are grateful
and everything mattered in the end

Molly in the Door 295

I went to the doorway and there was my daughter.
The sun was shining behind her
so I could barely make out her face
but I could see she was healthy
and strong and happy.
Hi Pops, she slugged me,
the way she always did,
and she gave me the biggest hug.
She held me in my arms and spun me slowly around,
spun her old man around,
rocking me on my feet.
I was astonished at her musculature
and the bright look in her eye,
it was joyous, and fearless
like she had been paddling a canoe in the sun
with good friends for a year.
I held on and began to cry ...

I woke up.

At first I was sad because it wasn't true,
my daughter wasn't really alive,
I would never hold her and swing her like that, again.
But then I thought this
is how she might be now,
easy and forgiving and strong as a horse,
and I began to laugh
the same way she used to laugh,
eyes closed, top teeth showing,
like a semi-moon on a starless night,
letting it out in one exhalation,
holding nothing back.

Ponies of the Green Road

The Green Road being no road at all,
but a grassy path leading to the lip
of Black Head lookout, a monster dome
at the mouth of Galway Bay

'Tis a majestic thing to behold
and the beginning of The Burren,
a mountain of limestone coughed up
by the sea, forever unfarmable.

There are twelve ponies here,
Shetlanders, all stunted
and knobby like Basset hounds,
in a paddock alongside the Green Road.

But the ponies in the paddock,
hemmed in by hedge and a stout stone wall,
have never been to the edge,
will never see the splendor.

There is something absurd
about shrinking a horse –
when do you stop,
when it fits in a spoon?

At every diminution
the horse becomes less useful,
and less handsome and less healthy,
more mixed up in their muscles.

Their eyes are like teenagers,
manes in their eyes,
and the foals stagger clumsily
in their freakish bones.

Point being that being small

makes tragedy ridiculous.
So I say rear up, children,
step up to the edge,

snort back at the green wide world

Jackie Frame

Jackie Frame was a fiddler,
he barely came up to my chin,
but when he played it was as if
the devil had nicked off his horns

The carpal tunnel braces on his wrists
pronounced the suffering
that comes from being good,
but Jackie grimaced, as to an enemy.

And when he set down the Bushmill's
his eyes spun like buttons,
he laid his brow against your breast
because a point was needing to be made,

And you could feel the alcohol
rappelling from himself to you
My bride is going to die, he wept,
her indicators are off

and there's nothing I can do
except play a lonely tune.

Return of the Prairie Falcon

When a bird flaps and flies
nobody cries.
Why demand that anything stay
when we are all going away?

And when we return
the hurting heart may burn
because something gone
once again shows its face,
and that blesses this place.

Without Darkness

for Chank

Without darkness
there is no light.
Without blindness,
no sight.
Without you,
there is no home.
Without words
no poem.

Greenland

Increasingly it becomes our own
as if we had not quit in the night and
run away

In memory it was always there
the green land spanking the air
with the dew

Until it became a lightheadedness
but not for the sun-kissed
likes of us.

Till we felt unworthy of a home.
The son in scripture was not welcome
at first

He made several tries before
getting it right, first at the wall
in that village,

then at the mouth of the well
where the women sat to tell
their neighbors

Finally the doorway of his father's house
and they were all an ignoramus,
grinning

Of course we are ushered in and
all is grandiose as grand
could be

what with the music, the rejoicing,
the slippery, bestial hallooing
and carrying on.

Scrum

Mulligan, Mulligan
when will you learn?
Your boy's in the bottle,
your girl's in the urn

Mulligan, Mulligan
Where is your brain?
The missus has cheated
you time and again

Mulligan, Mulligan
when will you quit?
Your work has been canceled.
The house smells of shit.

Mulligan, Mulligan
Time for a rest
The ball's in the chamber
the hammer is pressed.

Mulligan, Mulligan
run away down.
The lord is demanding
his rights from now on.

Druthers

I wish I was a better man
I wish I was more honest than I am

I am somewhat honest but prefer
to shade things in my favor

I am fairly kind, but with exceptions
as with the bombs in the basement.

My wife is right, I'm an angry guy,
and negativity scares people away.

I wish I could do a job just right,
just once, and have it be perfect, complete.

"That guy knew what he was doing,"
people would say. "That's the kind of man to be."

I wish I was the sort who radiates calm
and pleasantness and never flips the alarm.

But in fact I have this anxiety problem
so wishing is what I spend a lot of time on.

I don't know why I play the fool –
Perhaps to avoid being useful.

Bookend: Emigrant Song

*I fergot to take me medicine
Fergot to say me prayers
Fergot the valuable lessons
that drew me on this far*

*I stand at the stoop
of Lough Firney,
big toe in the stirrup
of humbled humility*

*Was it thus for every poet
for half a lovely hour
Was the buzz in the bonnet
so different to the flower*

*Does every Irishman suffer
the crime of his own betterment
And the lies he tastes
on his lips like peppermints*

*Run away man, be
unknown to yourself,
The hurting will stop
at the pitch of the well*



History

YUKON GOLD: Poemes de terre is a collected works of my line-break writings – not everything, but everything I still enjoy. Many have appeared in print before, in different versions, in magazines or anthologies. As many as possible are listed below, and the editors and publishers are thanked for their encouragement. (Titles in parenthesis) means the item appeared under a different title, or has been substantially altered.

ABRAXAS: My Bicycle, The Business of Bees, Happiness,
Drunken Christ
BALTIMORE REVIEW: To His Missus Returned from the Sea
BEGGAR'S BOWL: (Buffalo Pound)
BIG MOON: (The Reality Thing), Rachel the Student
BITS: Frankenstein in the Cemetery
BOSPHORUS ARTS PROJECT QUARTERLY: Sky Repair
CAFE SOLO: Your Human Being, Triangles Prisms Cones,
Anton's Syndrome, The Heart Sings a Song About Blood
CALLIOPE: Salesmen
CHOWDER REVIEW: The Lost Colony, (Kenwood), The Clarinet Is
a Difficult Instrument, Trompe l'Oeil
DACOTAH TERRITORY: Blind Li Po
DEEP CLEVELAND: This Poem Is a Public Service
DANSE MACABRE: Be Patient!
DELAWARE VALLEY COMPOSERS NEWSLETTER: The Clarinet Is a
Difficult Instrument
FALCON: Li Po, Iron Lung, Legerdemain
FIDDLEHEAD: Dry Wash
FOUNDLING REVIEW: Look What the Sun Has Lit Up
FLOATING ISLAND: Home Trees, This Gun Shoots Black Holes,
The Man in the Air, The New Country,
FUCK POETRY: The Lord God Addresses the Convocation of
Poets, Letter From Como
GLOOM CUPBOARD: Ice Flowers
GREAT CIRCUMPOLAR BEAR CULT: The Light, Pathetic Fallacy
GRUB STREET: Not Far from the Beach at Plum Island
HANGING LOOSE: (Look Li Po)

HIRAM POETRY REVIEW: Home Trees
IMPACT: Salesmen, The Beach at Plum Island
INK POT: Proof of God
INVISIBLE CITY: (Too Numerous to Mention), Poem, The Secret Storm, Look Li Po, This Poem Is a Public Service
ISTANBUL: Proof of God
KANSAS QUARTERLY: Accident, The Beagles of Arkansas, Dance of the Dog, Old Stone Enters into Heaven, The Audience, (Meet Me at Giant Wash)
LA FOVEA: Salesmen
LAKE STREET REVIEW: My Gun Shoots Black Holes, Bob Canizzarro's Living Room Décor
LAKE SUPERIOR REVIEW: Rachel the Student
LIGHT YEAR '84 (Anthology): The Clarinet is a Difficult Instrument, Tsunami, Browsers
LIT UP: Penn Station
MAD SWIRL: God Told Me to Tell You to Cut Your Hair
MAGAZINE OF SPECULATIVE POETRY: This Gun Shoots Black Holes
MANROOT: Letter from Como, The Man with Red Gloves, Louse
MARAJA: From the Roof of My Apartment Building in Downtown Minneapolis, Tsunami
MAVERICK: Intuitions, The Tide Complains, The Kindly Cannon, Courtesy
MEDULLA: Roads, Glutton
MIDWEST QUARTERLY: The Sugar Trap
MILKWEED CHRONICLE: The Clarinet Is a Difficult Instrument, Where Birds Fare Well, Little Jo
MINNESOTA MONTHLY: Signs, Hamsters
MOONS & LION TAILS: Li Po in Debt, (Things of Value), A Short Song to the Moon, My House
MNEMOSYNE: Cartes Postales, The Brood, The Family that Bathes Together, Dance of the Dog, Sneeze
NEW AMERICAN & CANADIAN POETRY: Li Po Dying, (Bells Are Ringing), Ghost, The Hunt, (Inside Kansas), (Who Makes These Moans)
NEW COLLAGE: This Gun Shoots Black Holes
NIBBLE: The Pittsfield Tornado

NORTH COUNTRY ANVIL: Elevators
 NORTH DAKOTA QUARTERLY: The Height of the Drouth
 NORTHEAST: Biker Bob Cannizzaro's Living Room Décor, The
 Lost Colony, In Praise of Granite
 OHIO JOURNAL: (Glue-Girl)
 ORPHEUS: The Man in the Air
 PANACHE: The Secret
 PAPER DARTS: L'Abbaye de les Abbeiles, Cannon Falls, Les
 Vacances Sont Finis, A Prayer for Money, I
 PAUNCH: The Business of Bees, Trompe L'Oeil
 PAWN REVIEW: The Minstrel & The Ladie, Last Year's Xmas
 Dance
 POETRY NOW: Taking a Job in Another Town, Old Stone Enters
 into Heaven
 PUDDING: Tsunami
 RATTLE: God Must Love Crazy People
 RIGHT HAND POINTING: Fountain Pen Poem
 ROAD/HOUSE: A Drive in the Country
 ROCKBOTTOM: The Beagles of Arkansas, Cleveland 1959, A
 Drive in the Country, From the Roof of My Apartment Building
 in Downtown Minneapolis
 ROLLING STONE: Eating & Flying (Airplane Food)
 RHYSLING ANTHOLOGY 1986: The Man in the Air
 SALT CREEK READER: Elephants, (The Girl in the Taxi)
 SALTHOUSE: Old Stone Enters Into Heaven
 SCOPCRAEFT: Three Dogs, More
 SHINE: When We Are Gone
 SMOKE: Meet Me at Giant Wash, Peace Poem
 SOUNDINGS EAST: The Iliad
 STEELHEAD: (Li Po)
 STONE COUNTRY: The New Country
 STORYSTONE: The Clarinet is a Difficult Instrument, (One Day
 Over lunch)
 STUDIO ONE: (I Hear Water)
 TANGENT: Ampersand
 TIOTIS: (Eating & Flying)

THIRD EYE: Trompe L'Oeil

TURTLE QUARTERLY: The Lazarus Cheese, In Minnesota, Drama
King

UNCLE: Browsers

WATER-STONE REVIEW: Lines Written the Morning of the Funeral

WHAT LIGHT (Anthology): Is There NASCAR in Heaven? Prayer
for Poets

WIND: I Feel Sorry for My Fish, Woman in the Blue Dress

WINDFALL: Centipede on Chop Suey

WRITING POEMS (Textbook): Frankenstein in the Cemetery

ZAHIR: Yevtushenko & Voznesenski

ZYGOTE IN MY COFFEE: God Told Me to Tell You to Cut Your
Hair, Kerouac's Will

Reviews of Yukon Gold

Yukon Gold: Poemes De Terre

By Mike Finley

Kraken Press of St. Paul, August 2010,
546 pp. **Downloadable, free PDF format.**

Reviewed by Karen Bowles

Mike Finley is an author who reminds readers of the eternal principles of matter – nothing dies, only changes form. In his expansive new collection, *Yukon Gold: Poemes De Terre 1970-2010 With A Key To The Mysteries*, he reveals a life spent witnessing and processing the ways in which humans build up or strip away the aspects of existence. His own life has seen both richness and difficulties, such as the death of his daughter from suicide. In this tome's author biography, he tellingly writes that he has two children – present tense, in spite of his loss. He and his wife, Rachel Frazin, created a foundation called *Robots & Pirates* in order to assist others who are encountering tough times whilst living and creating in the Twin Cities punk scene their daughter Daniele was an integral part of. This action, taking something difficult and creating new life and energy out of seeming destruction, is a recurrent theme in *Yukon Gold*.

Finley is a product of a proud Irish family, and Celtic symbology is interwoven in the literary threads. Horses are a common theme, and perhaps represent various personal traits of the author. For the Celts, the horse was sacred, and very powerful. Our modern word, *nightmare*, actually is thought to be derived from the Celtic idea that these dreams were brought to humans by a horse goddess. Horses can represent the night, achievement of freedom, and displays of strength, both magical and mundane. All of these adjectives can be used to describe the poetic imagery in Finley's work. Readers may well feel they are hearing Finley's personal motto in "Thoughts of Another Shetlander:"

So I say rear up, ponies,
step up to the edge,
snort back at the green wide world.

This is echoed in “Beasts of the Burren,” where the poet again urges readers to boldly take on the trials of life:

But the ponies in the poaddock,
sheltered by the hedge,
have never been to the edge,
will never see the splendor.”

Finley is a poet who prizes hard work and a firm self awareness. He is not one for lazy introspection, seemingly on a journey to find challenges worthy of a good fight. In “The Soul Is Not Perfect, Gets Set in Its Ways,” he abhors potential ruts that can keep a person from their potential:

You must be firm sometimes with the soul!...
Say, You belong to me,
now get to work.

Readers have their work cut out for them, in a good way, when they tackle this collection of poetry. Finley is unflinching in his presentation of heartbreak and loss, but it is always buoyed by a wry sense of humor and a wisdom that reveals the kind of fortitude that trusts in the changing of the seasons to bring about rebirth... as long as one is also personally invested in working to make things better. In “Everything Dies But Nothing Goes Away,” the all-too-human cycle of consumption and disposal is held up against the wall under a harsh spotlight, daring us to peel back the layers of habit and see what lies beneath our fictitious exteriors:

In front of a log cabin I saw a broken treadmill
labeled "Endurance."
I saw four school lockers, leaning side by side
against a wall, their yellow paint flaking
in the subzero cold....
A part of me says how wasteful.
A part of me says what a mess.
But it teaches us a lesson.
it teaches you that everything we make
takes up space.
We who ship everything off to the dump
have convinced ourselves we are tidy people
when somewhere a half dozen zip codes away
a landfill is groaning from our excesses.

All is not lost, ever, in the world Finley shows us. No matter the tribulations we must face, be it loss of a loved one or loss of an ideal, each event or item has value and can be, must be used for a better purpose. As the principles of matter once again are at play in “Everything Dies But Nothing Goes Away,” the poet leaves readers with hope, revealing that the edge of the horizon is not an ending, but another destination on the journey:

it is proof that things go on
it is proof we are grateful
and everything mattered in the end

Mike Finley is a Pushcart awardee who writes for a living in St. Paul. Mike's work has appeared in Paris Review and Rolling Stone. His most recent project is ZOMBIE GIRL, a graphic novel, the proceeds of which go to anti-suicide work in the Twin Cities. More info and samples are at <http://mfinley.com/daniele>.

Karen Bowles is the founder, publisher and editor of Luciole Press. She gained the nickname “Firefly” from a friend for her enduring love of the glowbugs in the South; “Luciole” means firefly in French. She graduated from San Francisco State University with a B.A. in Literature, and loves photography, reading, writing, theatre, and painting. After spending many years moving around, this military brat has laid down roots in Northern California, where you can find her gazing at stars and arguing with the bossy blue jay in her backyard.

The Toy Box of Youth: Mike Finley's Yukon Gold

REVIEWED BY DANNY KLECKO

Yukon Gold: Poems de terre, 1970-2010;

With a Key to the Mysteries

by Mike Finley

Kraken Press, St. Paul

Downloadable free [at this link](#)

Reviewer's disclaimer: Mike Finley has been my friend for many years.

Opening **Yukon Gold** is like is like finding the toy box of your youth on your 50th birthday.

This book took 40 years to compile. Forty years denotes an ..entire generation, and when I thought of all the labor, passion



and toil that had been put into these 300 poems, I became overwhelmed.

I say Mike Finley has the most unique poetry today. This

befuddles my colleagues.

But to me, my choice makes perfect sense. When I read poems, the topic isn't as important as the angle the poet views it from. When Finley begins a rant, you can be certain that he will start it from a vantage point that most of us would not have thought of using.

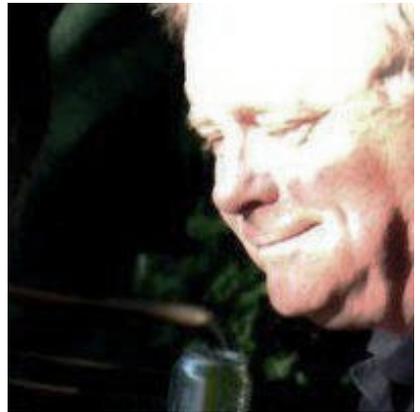
When I glanced at the table of contents, not 10 seconds elapsed before my first smile. Who else besides Larry David or Jerry Seinfeld could do a poem about Hitler, and not only "get away with it" but make you glad you invested a glance on it? Yep, Mike Finley can. In "Hitler in the Vestibule" we are treated to a story that Mike heard from a performance artist during a midnight show.

When the comedian was a little boy he grew up in Vienna and was at a hotel with his parents. Like most kids, he searched for imaginative ways to entertain himself. One of his better ideas was to hang out in the elevator and push the buttons for every floor, lighting the panel up like a Christmas tree.

How was the young boy to know that Hitler, on the very day of Anschluss, was in the lobby waiting to use the lift to take him to an important meeting? Hitler having to wait for a little boy on the day of his triumph!

Finley is deliberate in turning the most common people into heroic protagonists. In "Dishwasher" we are given a list of the different jobs in a restaurant from the top down. When the poem concludes, you can see Finley giving a wink of encouragement to us all.

But the dishwasher warms his
blood at the wrists



And it goes to his heart like wonderful liquor

Everyone yelling, but he doesn't hear

In "Thank You" Finley shares his gratitude with a motor cycle rider who sports the face of a pirate, leather pants and a beard of steel.

When this biker begins to ride slowly down Marshall Avenue, Finley's son cranes his neck out of a tiny stroller.

To see you pass

like Jesus entering the Jerusalem gate

And you waved

But the greatest hero of them all was a barber named Dave. When Mike's stepfather had finished his chemo treatments (he was dying from a brain tumor) Dave the barber would stop by every week. Even though his client was completely bald, Dave would pull out his clippers and run it across the skull where ghost hairs ran wild. They were unstoppable.

This would take place for about an hour, and both men would volley random conversations like "Kids today" or "Open Lots"

But the thing that touches Finley most is the phrase he ends with. When Dave was done he carefully

brushed the excess off

Shook the cloth off on the porch

Let nothing ride away on air

These lunch-bucket tributes are a continuing theme in **Yukon Gold**, and often times its subject matter will force you to slump into comfortable positions on the couch.

There is some edgy content that I'm glad I read. If I could forget "Jacob the Crow", I might be grateful. It is the most controversial poem in the collection, dealing with the famous Minnesota child abduction case of Jacob Wetterling.

Like most of Mike's poems, this one too starts with a natural occurrence. While hiking in the northern woods, Finley thinks he hears a boy's shrill cry. As his eyes peer across a marsh in hopes of spotting a waving mitten in need of help, Mike then realizes this sound isn't coming from a child in distress, but a distant crow.

Then the poem takes some dark twists and morphs into an outcome I will let you read for yourself.

But if you are one of those people who skip over footnotes, you mustn't here. On the bottom of the page Mike goes into detail as to how even though he wrote this poem for people to have a common focal point for grieving, one person in particular sent a poem in return that was really creepy in a calculated serial-killer kind of way.

The FBI got involved. Unless you can handle intense – well, you get the idea.

Then of course is the series of *The New Yorker* poems. Without a doubt "Minnesotan in New York" is my favorite.

A couple of years ago I had a cookbook published by the Minnesota Historical Society and the Martha Stewart camp wanted me to come out to Manhattan to discuss it.

Before leaving, I was feeling a little apprehensive, and realizing this, Mike sent me this poem in the mail.

It may have been one of the kindest gestures anybody has ever shown me.

What made this experience special was that in the poem, we Minnesotans basically end up having the upper hand on the natives from the Big Apple since we are less affected by the cold.

All along 6th Avenue phalanxes of muggers and
murders part

Melted from their purpose by sled dog eyes

Urgent and cheerful on a cold, cold night.

In “Dead Cat for Ray” our author sneaks a peek in his best friends diary, and instead of confessing, Mike simply starts his own diary, where the opening submission is about him peeking at his friends diary.

“Meet Me at the Carwash” and “University Avenue” are so epic that when I read them, I could see them in my mind as if they were movies, but not Hollywood movies, they were cooler and full of character like the stuff you see on the Independent Film Channel.

“Mini Van” and “Dog of God” were important reads as well.

I have to believe that. I could not have a cynic on my Top 10 Poets List.

Finley was once described as “America’s angry young poet,” but the poems “Minivan” and “The Dog of God” are proof that he subscribes to hope with a heart of gratitude.

Book reviews often look for clever ways to entice their audience to like (or dislike) a particular work. I’m just going to leave you with this. **Yukon Gold**, at 500+ pages, took me an entire day to

read. While I was reading it, I really felt transformed. When I closed the book, I rested in a wonderful glow for over an hour. Then, when I realized that the experience was in my rear view mirror, getting smaller, I got depressed. I didn't want to leave.

This book is a once-in-a-lifetime experience, people. Have fun with it.

DANNY KLECKO is the CEO of the Saint Agnes Baking Company in Saint Paul. In addition to feeding the Twin Cities daily, he has been able to lecture on baking and business principles throughout Europe and Asia. Although known as primarily a cookbook writer for the Minnesota Historical Society Press, he has also completed several poetry books and albums. His most recent is 30 Foot Pole (Lucky Park Productions). Danny lives with his wife Sue McGleno and four dogs in Highland Park.

The Self Collected: Mike Finley's *Yukon Gold*

REVIEWED BY CHRISTOPHER

TITLE

If she's good, and a little lucky, the poet arrives at a point in her career when the phone rings and an editor suggests publishing a collected works.

This comes after years of scribbling and years of licking envelopes—she has developed a taste for adhesive. She has worked hard, writing and otherwise, and so finds her books on the shelves of every bookstore in town. She is right proud of much of her work, but some she regrets, wonders, *How did that happen?*

A “collected” is a chance to draw from the best of her work and arrange it in such a way as to represent the full breadth and depth of her life's literary effort. And, I suppose, it is a chance to relegate lesser work to the background. In the end, it is the culmination of her poetical career.

Does not this moment trump all other moments, all those rarities of acknowledgment and accolade, every single fleeting frisson experienced as a poet contributing to the field? And it is a vocation for her, a job she has shown up to day after day writing verse and other oddments.

Poetry as a job holds such little promise for those who pursue it. Most toil in obscurity motivated by the desire to craft something memorable and plagued by the desire to craft something memorable. If any of the work is published, in some manner, then the total sum of satisfaction is gained, only to be lost immediately in the next lonely study. Yet, to have previously published work re-mastered into a Collected is something, if not memorable.

And here she is on the phone with the editor. *Yes, of course*, she says and sets down the receiver to gaze out the window.

But what if the poet is not so fortunate? What if the poet has worked for years publishing things here or there, or—gasp!—self-publishing? That kind of poet is the most common. He is the kind of poet down at the local open mic, the kind of poet actively contributing to social networks, participating in the community; he's somewhat of an outsider, iconoclastic and un-lauded. His poetry is good. He works hard. But editors don't call.

That kind of poet is Mike Finley. His *Collected, Yukon Gold: Poemes De Terre 1970-2010 with a Key to the Mysteries*, was not solicited by a major publishing house or the imprint of an academic institution. His opus is not found in the catalog of the Library of Congress (yet), it's free on the web. Any numbskull can locate it, download it, and enjoy.

At 534 pages, Finley's book is no compendium; it refuses to be condensed. *Yukon Gold* is epic in scope. Stretching over thirty years worth of work, it includes a wide range of subject matter and varying stylistic techniques. And, get this, it isn't finished yet.

In the preface, Finley describes his book as following in the tradition of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* and William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, "self-made and self-renewing," a work that is in a continuous state of revision and re-envisioning.

Over 70 of the poems are linked to video versions on the web, audio/visual representations posted on YouTube. The book also contains a plethora of annotations and explanatory notes. As Finley says, "indulgences are sought." What is perhaps most unusual is the author's call for feedback by providing a mechanism for comment. This self collected *Collected* is interactive.

Finley is no new-comer to publication, though his work in poetry and prose is mostly published nontraditionally. He claims over 100 published books, which means Finley has been striking out on his own for a good long time. All of it is available and accessible. Thank God for Mike Finley's Internet.

I get the feeling that Walt Whitman would approve. Like Whitman, Finley tilts toward a hyper-expressive, egalitarian view of the cosmos, everyone welcome, every leaf of grass counts for something, and just about every moment of his life as a poet has generated an impulse to versify. The results are, well, surprising. Consider the first movement of “This Poem is a Public Service.”

Listen when I talk you little nothings

Little zinc-heads in the cupboards

By the rattling plates

And the nutpicks and the mallets

And the napkins and the forks—

When it comes it will come

As a surprise.

This poem is written in homage to d. a. levy, a literary figure of 1960’s Cleveland (so says the note) and is a fairly good representation of Finley at work: a speaker finding an audience in cans of soup and the slightly off-kilter, hard music of lines enjambed. Finley says he admires levy’s feisty irreverence. It shows throughout much of *Yukon Gold*.

But the work is tender, too, as in the middle stanzas of “Cannon Falls.”

Rachel reads on the sofa,

I sit in the library and pull book

after book from the shelves.

Baseball books, history, politics, poetry.

In one is a poem by Jon Silkin

about the death of his child.

It is so heartbreaking I read it twice,

and the sorrow saws through me.

Suddenly, I don't hate poetry,

it is not false or vain or unimportant,

it is a way to talk and think

about things that matter most.

And things do matter to Mike Finley, the poet. Perhaps nothing so much as the life of his daughter Daniele, who committed suicide in 2009. Daniele's passing manifests within *Yukon Gold* in a number of poems. Readers interested may want to read Finley's *Zombie Girl* before looking for details within *Yukon Gold*. They are unmistakable, as in "Tattoos," a litany derived from the text of the medical examiner's list of Daniele's body markings.

Side of her right leg; skull with flowers and a snake

Side of her left leg: minotaur skull, with green
tentacles

Lower back, centered: a spider, a flower, and red
flames

Upper left back: skull with devil motif

Upper right back: skull with angel motif
Left shoulder and arm: against a maze-like
background
a skeleton with a bovine skull and hooves,
lifting a bottle in salute

Famed American composer Morton Feldman reminds us that, "Where in life we do everything we can to avoid anxiety, in art we must pursue it." Mike Finley's *Yukon Gold* has made the pursuit of anxiety—the approach of the big, difficult, unanswerable questions of life—its central aim, as its subtitle seems to suggest.

In "God Must Love Crazy People," Finley moves toward the heavy without burdening the reader with goofy aphorism:

When we weep ourselves to sleep
because we can't seem to change
and we drive the people we love
onto barstools, saying

it matters, it is fulfilling,
it is the indivisible element,
it is the purpose of
the entire experiment

God must love the crazy people
or why would He make us
such as these,
impossible to put up with
unhealable as disease

But I shouldn't put goofiness past Mike Finley because in many ways *Yukon Gold* employs the ridiculous to great effect, and I think poking fun into what can be an overly serious genre is Finley's *raison d'être*. Perhaps the most sublime poem in the whole collection is brief and to the wondering point, but it's also a gas:

The Stink

Does not understand
it is the problem

Brothers, sisters
where are you going?

Indeed, where are we going? I know Mike Finley is going to keep on writing, keep on revising his *Collected*, until, as he says, he is no longer able. Let it be so. And also let it be that *Yukon Gold* find an audience beyond soup cans and ghosts.

About the Author



MIKE FINLEY of St. Paul, Minnesota is a novelist, futurist, journalist, and videographer. He is married to nurse practitioner/Arctic anthropologist Rachel Frazin. and has two children: finger-style guitar composer Jonathan Finley and punk queen Daniele Finley, who died in August 2009. Mike and Rachel together operate Robots & Pirates, a foundation that helps people in the Twin Cities punk scene survive tough times.

Mike is of Irish descent. His mother was one Mary Josephine Mulligan Finley Konik of County Down, a poor good woman who rose in the world from "the slummiest name in Ireland,"

according to James Joyce to a kind of a queen of the excavating trades in northeastern Ohio's Firelands. As a child, it was Mike feared his mother would divorce his father and revert to the name Mulligan – Mike Mulligan, the steam shovel driver who walled himself up in a house being built. And she did, but he kept his name.

As poet Mike has written numerous collections, including 22 drawn on for this book. He is winner of a 1984 Wisconsin State Arts Fellowship, and he appeared in he 1985 Pushcart Prize Anthology XI. In 1995 he and co-author Harvey Robbins were awarded top prize for the Americas for their book *Why Teams Don't Work*.

His work has appeared in Paris Review, New American & Canadian Poetry, Invisible City, Floating Island, and Rolling Stone. *Yukon Gold* is his last will and poetical testicle.

A prose volume also exists: *A Cellarful of Nose*, [downloadable here](#) at no charge.

Also of interest:

[About Daniele Finley](#)

[Mike's videos](#)

[Mike's website](#)

Follow Mike on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#)

About [Kraken Press](#)

I have heard people say that Kraken is a poor excuse for a small press. To the contrary, it is an excellent one.

The Kraken was a sea-beast described in classic tales, whom no two describers could agree upon. It was alternately half-snake, half-fish, half lion, half-squid. That's a lot of halves, and we enjoyed that ambiguity.

Kraken Press *happens* to have published a handful of print books, notably the books *Among Dreams* and *Equilibrium Fingers* by Minneapolis poet-prophet Barry Casselman.

But mainly, Kraken eschews the wooded-page world for online publication.

Kraken sees itself as a publisher of last resort. It swoops in to salvage projects that seem deserving but have run out of gas with their original publishers. It supported projects by Estonian born poet Helgi Michelson and (then) Cottonwood, Minn. poet Florence Dacey.

In addition we have provided support for David Mura, Deb Thornton (pen name), and other people, mostly writer-friends of ours.

Also, Kraken slavishly promotes publisher Mike Finley's own publishing appetites. It arose from the discovery that publishing one's own work (usually, in a single day, with no review from other minds) triggered vast quantities of pleasure receptors in the brain.

In the 1970s The Kraken published four of his frequent occasional books – *14 Poems a Dollar*, *Dr. Newyear*, *The Woman I Love*.

After that, Kraken went electronic, publishing ebooks and esheets by Mike through the current day – a total of 43 titles. Some of these titles: *The New Yorker*, *The Upset Sea*, *Skibbereen*, *Moab*, *You*, and *The Thing that Devoured Duluth*, Parts I and II.

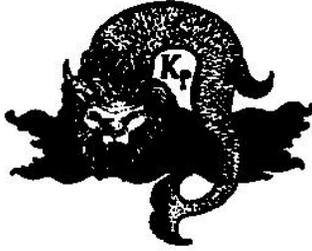
In 2009 Kraken Press jumped the tracks and spawned a new product line of poetry videos, viewable [on YouTube here](#).

Yukon Gold: Poemes de terre is the most ambitious effort ever undertaken by Kraken Press.

Hey, writers:

Do not send your work to Kraken Press until you have exhausted every other possibility, including cuneiform tablets, and have evidence of such. Our budget is minuscule and our energy is worse. But we love that you are thinking, and want you to be encouraged to continue. Working with and encouraging other creators helps us to deserve to continue to write our own things. Publishing is one way we do that.

Idea – consider starting your own version of Kraken – then tiny budgets and scant energy like ours can be yours.



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