

PR  
CK



jest  
poems

by  
mike  
finley

## Introduction

I recently appraised the bulk of my work over the past three years, and the materials I chose for readings, etc., and realized I wasn't much fun anymore.

To that end I compiled this collection, *Prick*. It is a compilation of knockdown, dragout, rib-tickling, backslapping humorous verse – what a repulsive phrase – going back to 1968.

Please enjoy it.

THE AUTHOR

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## **We Asked For A Sign**

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

## The Stink <sup>1</sup>

Does not understand  
it is the problem

Brothers, sisters  
where are you going?

---

<sup>1</sup> Things (2009)

## 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.

## The Rapture <sup>2</sup>

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.

---

<sup>2</sup> The Rapture (2009)

## Shampoo <sup>3</sup>

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

---

<sup>3</sup> Moab (2005)

## 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

## Boy Pee<sup>4</sup>

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.

---

<sup>4</sup> The Rapture (2009)

## 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.

## **Eclogue**

Half a Monopoly board  
blown into a thistle bush  
in the Colorado chaparral –  
the game ended here.

## 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

## Dream of God Driving a Bulldozer<sup>5\*</sup>

*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 ...

---

<sup>5</sup> 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

## My Darling Serpentine <sup>6</sup>

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

---

<sup>6</sup> Desalinization (2010)

## **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

## 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

## Courtesy <sup>7</sup>

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

---

<sup>7</sup> Horses Work Hard (2000)

## 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

## 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?'

## Les Vacances Sont Finis <sup>8</sup>

*(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.”

---

<sup>8</sup> 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!

## 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.

## **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

## Bad Neighbor<sup>9</sup>

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.

---

<sup>9</sup> You (2002)

## Le Train Envers <sup>10</sup>

*(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.

---

<sup>10</sup> Cartes Postales (2008)

## Bathtime <sup>11</sup>

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.

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<sup>11</sup> Cartes Postales (2008)

## 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.'

## Poets Ruin Everything <sup>12</sup>

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

---

<sup>12</sup> Desalinization (2010)

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.

## The Upset Sea <sup>13</sup>

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

---

<sup>13</sup> The Upset Sea, 2010

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 <sup>14</sup>

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

---

<sup>14</sup> The Upset Sea, 2010

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."

## At Swanson Lake <sup>15</sup>

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.

---

<sup>15</sup> The Upset Sea (2010)

## **Bloop** <sup>16</sup>

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?

---

<sup>16</sup> The Upset Sea (2010)

## Apotheosis

Given lengthening life expectancies,  
it is logical that a man  
will some day enter the ladies room by mistake,  
and then it is incumbent upon everyone there  
to keep it together,  
for the women to be cool,  
because this is not the way maniacs act,  
this does not lead to blood,  
except the blood that goes  
to the face  
because the man was thinking  
about something or other  
and pushed the wrong door,  
it could happen to you  
if you let your guard down  
in that sense it is an index of virtue,  
because for one second in your life  
you were too afraid to be afraid  
and you look goggle-eyed into one another's faces,  
astonished, befuddled,  
perhaps even kindness played on the edges  
of that horrorstruck look,  
in the way that embarrassment,  
nakedness, the fact of our bodies  
must bring us together.  
even if we then veer off in opposite directions  
and never speak of this to anyone,  
for a second we were together,  
holding everything precious we own  
in damp and trembling hands,  
and you wonder, if I can do this  
and live,  
what other limits are there?

## Poet Wasting

The main reason we hunted them down  
was because there  
was so dang many of them.

We're not a cruel people,  
it would have been crueler  
to let them live.

Put a bounty on their heads  
and set them loose  
at the onset of winter,

run them down before too long  
and if you sent the liver  
to the DNA

for testing and it  
came back OK  
you got to keep the whole thing.

It was hard at first, looking into  
those plaintive eyes  
then jacking the trigger

It wasn't their fault  
they were so numerous,  
all they ever really wanted

was to say a thing  
so it lived a while  
in the heart

but even that  
got old  
after a while

## Expectancy

*(found poem)*

The Lifetime of a lightbulb  
is the number of hours it lasts  
before going out.

Charlene buys a lightbulb

with a lifetime of 932 hours.

How many weeks can Charlene  
expect this lightbulb to last  
if she uses it exactly

seven hours and 40 minutes

every single day?

## **Son of a Birch**

The birch tree is a flasher  
bolting out of the clearing.  
See how white my pale ribs are,  
how flammable my skin,  
I tell you I'm a firestarter!  
I always want to peel it off  
till I'm bare! bare! Bare!  
I'll blind you if you peek!

## Mighty Poem

There is a paradox in English, that some words mean the opposite of themselves.  
Thus *sanction* can mean either permission or impermission.  
Now, one of our commonest words, *might*,  
can mean raw power, almost beyond measure,  
the might of the hydroelectric dam,  
the might of God,  
the might of Mighty Mouse,  
and on the other hand it is the subjunctive form of the verb *may*,  
meaning it's possible, conceivable, it could go either way.  
Looks like it *might* rain.  
I *might* go to the dance with you,  
a locomotive *might* be a speeding hound, or it *might* not.  
You can feel the power leak out of that form.  
The subjunctive *maybe* – it doesn't get less mighty than that.  
And most poets take refuge in the maybe--  
I might change my life.  
There might be a God,  
A man might dream,  
who knows.

\*

Poets are pussies, it's a well-known fact.  
We languish daytimes on our sofas in our gherkins  
and blue silk stockings,  
chewing our hangnails,  
play Mother Might I and order out.

We are like oil paintings of sad clowns  
with bleared greasepaint  
that normal people can't look at long  
because it causes confused feelings.

And when we fight we are like women slapping  
because we are afraid to land a punch.  
We think about flowers and our dead grandmothers

and maybe we suck on our thumbs,

\*

When are we going to fight like men?  
When will we challenge ourselves not to be more sensitive  
or to bear greater pain or to honor the past  
but to advance a proposition  
and make it stick?  
Why are we so miserable and insecure and envious?  
Who cares what fucking Frank got from the Carnegie Mellon  
Fund?  
Why aren't we being obvious, and sentimental, and funny?  
Why aren't we getting drunk and falling down the stairs?  
Why are so few poems about ballgames and tits  
when those are what we love?  
Why aren't love poems gushing out of us like springwater from a  
stone?  
Why aren't we thanking our mothers and fathers?  
We should be endorsing candidates and christening bridges  
and honoring the dead.  
We shouldn't be going over anyone's head  
including our own.  
We should be clear as champagne  
and twice as fun.

\*

A mighty poem is not a maybe poem.  
It flows like rushing water to the sea.  
A mighty poem is for everyone.  
It tolls for you as well as tolls for me.  
A mighty poem burns calories and works on you  
until you have to stop and breathe.  
A mighty poem is willing to pay the cost.  
It says to you, get furious, or lost.

## Death by Gopher

He's cute by the campsite  
bounding from crumb to crumb,  
cupping your leavings in tiny twig hands  
and rotating it as he gnaws.

A trail of shredded wheat  
leads to your fire  
till he dashes up your pantleg  
and you commence to hop around

Slapping your cuffs and  
calves and thighs and  
imagining those tiny twigs  
are sinking into flesh

You picture it diving  
into the hole it made  
in your muscle and rooting  
around in your meat.

You are in a fine state now  
pointing your pistol down  
your pants and squeezing  
off a round and lying down

Staring up, the Milky Way  
all creamy and a shooting star  
too quick to draw,  
the snap of a log in the fire

Close those eyes,  
brave chevalier,  
and know that nature  
was never your friend

## The Claw

I invented bits of business with my kids.  
One was a character I would turn into  
while they sat on my lap.  
One moment I was their loving fond father  
and the next thing you knew  
I was The Claw  
and I would utter the name like that,  
hyperdramatically,  
as if something were caught in my throat.  
The hand would go up,  
it would cast a shadow  
on their wide-eyed faces.  
They knew something incredible  
was about to happen,  
and it did, The Claw descended,  
found their soft child bellies,  
and commenced to tickle.  
What agony it was, writhing under  
my stiff-fingered wiggling.  
I could feel their wonderful  
abdominal muscles clench,  
and then The Claw would evanesce,  
and they would be in my arms again,  
and I would blink  
as if I remembered nothing  
of the terrible transformation.  
Where did he come from?  
A dark radio-drama world  
where monsters in trenchcoats  
blew fart-noises into the tummies  
of small children.  
The lesson was that  
the world could be naughty,  
and even loving fathers had a secret side  
but it was OK,  
The Claw was never around  
for very long, and we laughed

and laughed and laughed.

## The Poem Room

It is a place of shame,  
the only room with a lock  
on the door.

To make it come out  
you loosen your garments  
and drop them to the floor.

There is paper there  
for you to use,  
one sheet after another.

But when you are done  
how proud you are  
of what you have authored.

You want to call people in  
to show them what  
you've made

and they smile  
because they don't want  
you to feel dismayed,

but in the end it is  
the one thing you do  
that is expressly you

## Charley

I wanted my son Jon, a smallish kid  
heading off to school, to feel strong.  
So I invented a persona for him, named Charley,  
a guy with an attitude, not especially sensitive,  
the kind that doesn't sweat the small stuff,  
the kind that acknowledged you by raising his chin,  
as in Good Time Charlie.  
When he climbed up the giant steps  
of the school bus, I'd say to him,  
"Hey, have a good day, Charley."  
It was something just for him, a cool cat.  
But the driver heard it, and so did some of the kids.  
So I learned, twenty years later,  
that half the kids at his school  
thought his name was Charley, and called him that  
throughout his elementary years,  
and being shy, he never corrected them.

## Feces

Freud was right on,  
They are a key to every little life,  
they are the threshold of not-OK.  
They are a guarantor of calamity,  
A ruiner of days,  
They are the thing you want at all costs to avoid,  
The thing to keep behind you always,  
that trips you up and peels you  
from the throne of respectability,  
and tells you,  
you must go.

And yet they come out of *you*,  
they *are* you,  
they are homunculi of who you are,  
they are your little tar babies,  
they have your eyes,  
they are the part of you you want to get far *away* from,  
and that is a major paradox for the 2-year-old.

To be found out, to fail, there is no disgrace  
completer.

Logically everything relating to them  
is awful, unlovable, stinky, and to be shunned.  
No amount of washing,

no slathering of soap makes them right,  
you aren't even really supposed to poke around  
even though it is you  
and your solemn responsibility  
and yet ...  
and yet ...  
and yet they remain riveting in their own  
strange feckless way  
incorrigible,  
they bear the mark and are your mark..

It is as if,  
when the two of them in the garden,  
you know the famous two I mean,  
they who had never before known waste,  
having had a bad, bad, bad, bad day,  
Had it read back to them then,  
the riot act I mean to say,  
and the perfect world was shuttered,  
all was forfeit, all was lost,  
and the one thing they knew,  
as they picked their way through the fallen world,  
was they had to go.

## The Wagon

I was six when we moved to Vermilion-on-the-Lake,  
six doors down Niagara Road from the lapping Lake Erie

Mornings and afternoons I walked the bluffs and beaches  
gazing out at the choppy gray water

One day I took it into my head  
to fill my Radio Flyer with dead fish

and roll it back to my mother's house  
I don't know what I was thinking

that she had a recipe for 30 pounds  
of eyeless, sand-pounded carp

I had to bury them in the field behind us  
my mom was very clear on that

and I stood over the grave with a shovel  
and I vowed as God was my witness

to keep an eye on my judgment in the future  
but I have to say, all these decades later

the problem persists

## Stepping Into Underpants

gets harder every year.

The knees get stiffer, the hips  
do not want to make the number four,  
the one foot hopping on the floor  
leads the body into the bedstead,  
the doorknob, the chair.

And the seat of the underpants  
is not new cloth,  
the fabric has grown tired  
from so many washings,  
and sittings, and scratchings,  
the elastic has been through the dryer  
too often, it stretches  
but it no longer snaps back.  
it is more like a veil than a rampart,  
and the stabbing foot could so easily miss  
its target and plunge through  
the rear panel entirely.

And it will only get worse,  
until the old man has to sit on the bed,  
and pull them on the way George Washington did,  
with a stable boy to assist you,  
and an aide-de-camp standing by,  
proud nostrils flaring.

## Permutations

*Permutations of n things taken r at a Time*

We learn this phrase in algebra.

It asks how do we arrange a list of possibilities –  
if 10 horses run a race.

what are the chances for win, place, and show?

And so it goes.

Every crossroad contains x possibilities.

What happens if we turn left or proceed forward,  
or veer off the gravel and into the corn?

There is a formula to help us get a handle on this,  
but it raises as many questions  
as it answers.

$${}_n P_r = \frac{n!}{(n-r)!}$$

But what if, as happens,

P is an elastic variable?

The mare with the the white flame on her face  
could come up lame on the second turn,  
pulling at her straps.

The rider in green could think to himself,

What I have really always wanted to do  
is paint.

Or he moon could turn out  
after lengthy investigation  
to be a sourball hanging  
in the August sky.

## The Boards

Be joyful as you climb the steps  
put spring in your toes and the treetops

You are measured out for these sleeves  
and boxed in by these exigencies

God gave you bells so give them a shake  
let them tinkle to the striking clock

Say oh what a beautiful day  
as if you were Gordon Fucking McCrea

## Cosmetic Dentistry

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

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.

## 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  
coming 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

## 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 at. 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 long sleep now!

## **Little Bighorn**

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! '

## At The Koin-O-Kleen

Am I the only one who likes  
running his hands through  
soiled clothes in public?

we pretend we're on  
an elevator, intent on something  
straight ahead.

The enormous man on the sorting table  
sips Mr. Pibb through a straw,  
naked to the waist.

Tattooed on his right tit  
is the word SWEET,

on his left the word SOUR.

## 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.

But with me it was different.  
I was an actress,  
and I lived for my audience.

## Govinda And The Park Policeman

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."

## In a Tent

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 poststroke 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.

## 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'

## **Beloved Bard**

He can't even go out to eat  
Without someone with a napkin and ballpoint  
Asking you for a quick line.  
He is unfailingly polite  
And dashes something off  
But he wishes just once  
He could enjoy his spaghetti

## 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.

## Hitler In The Vestibule

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 Anshuss 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.

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.

## Penn Station

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."

## Maury

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.

## The Clarinet Is A Difficult Instrument

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.

## Mm-Hmm

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

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.

## **Intuitions**

Why do we hold them  
In such high regard  
When they are what got us  
The way that we are?

## The Tide

complains  
ish ish ish

## Tsunami

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

## **Why Did The Buddha Sit Under The Tree?**

To get to  
the other side.

## **Parking Lot**

The attendant at the parking lot  
Was angry this morning.  
His shovel was missing,  
And in a crack in the blacktop  
Near the corner of Eighth & LaSalle,  
Five weeds were sticking their heads up,  
Looking for trouble.

## Minivan

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.

## **Man & Monarch**

The man pokes out a finger as a perch ...  
Sure enough, two flit close by ...  
And he wonders what it might lead to ...  
Some kind of breakthrough between butterfly and man ...  
We have shared airspace but never points of view ...  
The insects desire contact, but there is that matter  
of our pinning them to corkboards ...  
We magnify their faces to make proper eye contact ...  
But when we see their twitching protuberances up close we draw  
back ...  
We hold peace conferences and praise them for their kitelike  
beauty ...  
They describe their unhappiness with riding lawn mowers ...  
They teach us about the dazzle of sunlight, about the silence  
of the chrysalis, the transformation  
from glutton worm to ravishing angel ...  
We read poems and they beat their clapboard wings ...

## 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 carcass?

**Do not run.** You can't outrun a bear so don't try.

People say to run downhill from a grizzly. **Don't.**

Try **backing away.** Sometimes they let you do that.

**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.

Should it maul you, **keep your backpack on.** Wear it in front of you if possible.

Do not **play dead** until you almost are.

Once mauled, **be patient.** Only when the bear has finished should you crawl away.



## 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 world 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!

## **Entrepreneur**

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

## Antic Hey<sup>17</sup>

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

---

<sup>17</sup> The Beagles of Arkansas, 1978

## Browsers <sup>18</sup>

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.

## **My Poor Fish** <sup>19</sup>

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

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<sup>19</sup> Borrowing from Minneapolis (To Pay St. Paul) (1980)

## When You Are Pope<sup>20</sup>

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.

---

<sup>20</sup> Sunset Lake (1989)

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,  
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.

## The Newmans of Westport<sup>21</sup>

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

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<sup>21</sup> Namedroppings (1982)

through clutched raincoats and return  
to wait for the next living soul.

## God & Hippopotamus <sup>22</sup>

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.

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<sup>22</sup> Water Hills (1985)

## Old Stone Enters Into Heaven <sup>23</sup>

*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,

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<sup>23</sup> 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.

Shivering, up and imploringly searched  
For the better nature behind his red  
Eyes as he pulled two sticks of  
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.

## The Wreck of the Hesperus <sup>24</sup>

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

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<sup>24</sup> The Ballad of the Curtis Hotel (1994)

and tipped and dumped its feast.

Coffee grounds, eggshells, cereal  
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 <sup>25</sup>

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 in my class on prosody in the Humanities Building at the University. I had completely forgot.

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<sup>25</sup> The Ballad of the Curtis Hotel (1994)

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.

## 'The Minstrel & The Ladie' <sup>26</sup>

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.

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<sup>26</sup> Water Hills, 1985

## Embarrass<sup>27</sup>

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.'

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<sup>27</sup> Borrowing from Minneapolis (To Pay St. Paul), 1980

## Death as Snack Cake<sup>28</sup>

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

and we who dreamed  
so many things  
are the filling surprise

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<sup>28</sup> The House of Murk (1972)

**To the Young Poet Who Wished  
To Know How to Do Better**<sup>29</sup>

Your haiku  
are too long.

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<sup>29</sup> Horses Work Hard (2000)

## Billboard <sup>30</sup>

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.

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<sup>30</sup> Midnight at the Mounds (2004)

## Remainders <sup>31</sup>

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.]

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<sup>31</sup> Remainders (1990)

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.

## 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?

## Pandit

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  
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.

## I Saw A Deer, Now I Must Write A Poem

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.

## lcky

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 a friend

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

## Nighttime in Heaven

was the nicest surprise because  
you expect it to always be day

but after dark is when the fun starts  
and all the praise is packed away

there is music far across the lake  
and occasional applause and whistles

for long stretches everything  
is impossibly funny, and you

keep saying of course, of course  
except your cheeks don't ache

and there is time for tender walks  
under a moon that is bigger than a house

and if you want you can rest on the stoop  
hand in hand with your life's best friend

everyone sleeps in a heaving pile  
and has the most wonderful dreams

people of every ethnicity smacking their lips  
and don't try to do the math on this

but they all hold on to god's pajamas