

89 Objects of Happiness Arrayed in Ascending Order

Mike Finley

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Explanation

In 1997 I met and interviewed Dr. Martin Seligman, sometimes called the Father of Positive Psychology. In his youth he was an associate of B.F. Skinner, inventor of the Skinner box, a mechanistic approach to understanding and shaping human (and rat) behavior.

Eventually Seligman broke free from the Skinner Box idea. Why is psychology obsessed with what's wrong with us, he asked -- neuroses, psychoses, syndromes, tendencies and the like. Why doesn't it focus more on happiness -- knowing what makes us happy, and pursuing it as a primary goal, like in the declaration of Independence?

Me, too. I still write weird, dark things sometimes. But I try to place greater focus on the things I see or experience or imagine that make me feel better about this strange world, this challenging life, and maybe make you feel better, too.

That's what this book is about. A gift. For you. Enjoy!

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One. *At the Intersection of Hamline and St.
Clair*

Bursting from behind the consignment store
is a young woman in running shorts,
slim and blonde, with perfect skin.
She crosses St. Clair in four graceful strides,
her running shoes barely pressing against the street.
Motorists follow her with their eyes.
Then her followers come into view --
five boys age thirteen or fourteen,
in their clunky gym shorts and sneakers,
all stumbling in graceless, panting jerks.
They are just eighth graders, and so
must the beautiful girl be, so young, a whole head taller
and more advanced than them in every way.

2013

Two. *How We Became One*

Beau staggered out of the house and stood
on the lawn, huffing and puffing.

I coaxed him to step toward me but he couldn't.

His legs wobbled beneath him. His chest heaved.

I lifted him up, like a lamb, and carried him in
and laid him down. running my fingers through his coat,
patting him on the hollow spots around his ribs.

I was snuffling, but it wasn't too bad.

I remembered the first day we brought him home,
15 years ago, and we did the same thing, he and I --
lay our heads together on a beanbag chair,
the one with the leopard skin spots, and
closed our eyes and slept.

And when we awoke, we belonged to one another.

2010

Three. *Cycling*

I love being able to climb a hill
I didn't think I could
and the look on the motorist's face
when I come to a stop and stop.
Hang in there say the telephone poles.
The shiny storefronts have your back
Death may toot its grim ocarina
but see the light step
through the trees!

2004

Four. *The Problem of Consciousness*

To be aware, and to be able to contemplate a thing
is such a kick. So many millions of opportunities
we are allowed to have a laugh,
or put two things together,
or be astounded by a weird coincidence
that seems to have no meaning but there it is anyway,
teasing your mind. It's like someone has dropped
a hand grenade down your chimney
and it goes off inside you and you are riddled
with tickles and tingles. This is our life,
a long walking with consciousness, which can cause
such delight, as we seek to maximize the poems
spread over the hills like bright flowers
while struggling to deal with the shit that enters
in the same way, the pitiable state we find ourselves in,
the bills in the mail can't hope to pay,
the people who don't understand us no matter how
we explain, the sad stories we tell ourselves
till we believe they are true.
The world doesn't care about any of this, it just is --
go stand by a pond for twenty minutes if you doubt this,
the risen state, the ability to know, is our fallen state
as well, sobbing into the pillows of impossibility,
all of it coming from the same good place in our heads,
in our hearts, in our lives.

Five. *Standing in Doorways*

When I was young I was often high on the things around me, full of amazement then looking for someone to share it with.

When I was 17 I hitchhiked from Ohio to Minnesota to see a girl I had gone to school with, I endured every hardship on the long trip -- cold, detainment, robbery, near rape.

But when I rang the doorbell I was reminded I gave no notice that I was coming. I just showed up, expecting -- what?

My wonderful girlfriend -- well, the girlfriend of the guy standing beside her in the doorway -- looked at me in shock.

Somehow I thought it was OK to bomb in on people. I was this magical being for whom rules did not apply. My showing up made everything OK.

I was full of consciousness and wanted to tell people. Everywhere I went I wrote down my thoughts and impressions, I would bicycle to a friend's house and read off what I had just typed, hoping he or she would jump up and down with me on the porch, holding my hands in theirs. They didn't.

As I got older, and prouder, I stopped looking to people to share my excitement. I started to look critically at them and think, they won't get it. I'm not going to beat

on that door. I faced facts, I was a pain in the ass, going nowhere.

Now I am getting to the end of the story, and I feel the child returning to me. I feel it watching my dog dance in the woods, watching the beautiful girls running down Mississippi River Boulevard, watching people be people at SuperAmerica, on their knees in their gardens, laughing in the bar at night, down by the spillway, a band blowing music into the dazzled room.

And I'm thinking, what a great gift this is, this seeing and becoming aware, and thinking, then talking back to the world. Poor frozen people standing in their doorways, umm-ing and err-ing and unsure what's the right thing to say. I was a dope, but all I wanted was love and joy.

Say it with me, what a gift the gift of consciousness is!

Six. *To Sister Marian in Chardon*

"Free verse is certainly a release for those who can express themselves so potently!" - Sr. Marian

I know you are trained to fend off thanks
Especially when the form is so wild.
But know that I kept all the prayers and letters
You have sent me since I was a child.

In the 50s teaching free verse was unthinkable –
So lazy, so deserving of shame.
That is not the way they teach you to teach
At the School Sisters of Notre Dame.

We kids in eighth grade admired you so
You taught us to live our lives as if
Jesus were always in the room with us
Hanging in back with St. Joseph.

At times you seemed like a mother
To us, although we called you Sister.
You cared, you corrected us when we were bad –
You always were our teacher.

I read that sisters live long lives
And are less susceptible to dementia.
The work, the purpose, the service to others
And all that that meant to you.

What if I had lived like that!
How it must sustain the body and mind
Those years not getting minimum wage
You were in heaven the whole time.

2017

Seven. *Taking the Dog into Bed*

Forget the sandy paws from the walk by the river.

Forget the just washed sheets.

Let her up with you.

Let her lay her chin on your shoulder.

You stroke her in the dark.

You smell her beautiful smell.

You thump her on the ribs, it makes that
watermelon sound.

She licks your fingers.

You close your eyes and sleep.

2017

Eight. *'Your Dog Is Beautiful'*

Sometimes at the dog park, I say to an owner, preferably of an everyday sort of dog, “Your dog is beautiful.”

And the owner will look to make sure I am talking about his dog and not someone else's.

And in that moment he will see his dog the way someone else might see him, and sure enough, the dog is beautiful – if not in bearing or contour, then in the joyful way the dog is bounding across the yard.

It may have been a while since anyone said, “Your dog is beautiful,” and this was a valuable reminder of what he has – a special dog, a cut above. That dog that loves you so much is worthy of loving you – because he's beautiful.

It is also a recognition that not everything is always great, having a dog. Every dog has some monumental flaw, designed to inflict embarrassment or disappointment on the owner, over and over again.

But this – “Your dog is beautiful.” It's like a button that resets the relationship.

The owner looks at the dog and is reassured that all this tension is worth it. That he was wise to adopt this dog, and that he has been blessed for his wisdom in doing so.

Sometimes it is the dog that needs praise. People are busy and it's not always possible to give the dog the time and the open space to be happy. The owner subtly blames the dog for having these needs to sniff and chase. It's sad, but we do.

That is a discouraged dog, and I will kneel before him, on both knees, and massage his neck and throat – never patting down on the head, which dogs find irritating. Of course they don't understand your words, but they get the gist from words like "good" and "dog."

You massage them for a moment, maybe removing some gook from an eye, because the dog knows you are OK and will grant you this access. A thumb gently rubbing inside the ear is usually welcome. Scratch them just above the tail -- everyone likes that, even you.

The dog's life is neurotic, standby equipment for a creature not designed to stand by, one who craves joy in the moment, not down the road. Every time you walk out the door is crushing to him.

And you say, "You are such a good dog, such a good dog."

And the dog looks at you with deep understanding, as if to say, "You know, I'm trying! It's not easy! Not at all!"

And you stand and look to the owner, who has been very flattered by all this attention, and you ask, very simply: "Good dog?"

And the owner, joyful himself to be seen, and to have his love acknowledged, after so many dull days of walks and feedings and picking up poop, always against the clock, always with the feeling that maybe it was a mistake, taking this animal into one's house, looks up at you and says:

"Yes. Very. Oh, yes!"

Nine. *How It Works*

We are seed 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 nucleus
Inside us all along, that we arose
From the core of a golden sun
And the day of blooming
Has been gathering inside
The whole while

2002

Ten. *Like a Joke*

A good one is like a joke.

It begins and it ends and in between

It triggers a shift in expectations.

You thought A, but it turned out to be B.

So you are fooled, which is always good.

Our presumptions are what make us hilarious.

The change overtakes us like a choking fit

and for a while we oscillate between

a clench and a release,

a test of our virtue, a test of our strength.

Then it parts and the new information

washes over us, blessing us

like a blossoming field.

2015

Eleven. *The Trumpeter at Willow Falls*

The falls at Willow River are three-layered like a cake,
cold water spilling over the edges like icing.

Suddenly an enormous white bird, a trumpeter swan,
Is flapping directly above us.

We shield our eyes with our hands and watch the swan
splash down on the topmost tier, then tumble end
over end down the first whitewater cascade,
then cartwheel down the second, wing over wing,
and then splash belly first into the third,
then momentarily disappear,
then surface again atop the raging waters,
shaking the rain from its feathers,
then jump back into the sky.

You expect grace and elegance from any kind of swan
But this is the clumsiest exhibition either of us has ever
seen.

2007

Twelve. *Charley*

I wanted my preschool boy Jon to feel strong.
So I gave him a new name as he boarded the bus.
A name with an attitude, not a sensitive one,
a name that didn't sweat the small stuff,
a name that juts out its chin.
When he climbed up the giant steps
of the school bus, I said"
"You have a good day, Charley."
But the driver heard, and so did 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 grade school years,
and being a shy boy,
he never corrected them.

Thirteen. *Minivan*

We couldn't afford a good van but this one
was good enough – new tires, AC, automatic
tranny, slant six engine.

We were in awe, it smelled like road angel, and though
it had already rolled ninety thousand amazing miles
with people we didn't know strapped in for the ride
we felt it had waited all this time for us.

And when we sailed west through badlands and buttes,
and we filled our thermos at Wall Drug,
and bought giant glazed doughnuts for the kids
and licked our fingers afterwards, it was
with a new covenant between us, between
family members and machine, a promise
to travel with one another, as one.

And when I left our wallet and \$900 in cash
on a trash receptacle at a convenience store
in Mount Jumbo high up in the Montana Rockies,
and you all looked at me and realized what I had done
and we jammed twenty miles back up the mountain
our minds hard from wishing, and there it was,
my crappy old wallet still sitting on the ATM,
Twenties exposed like lettuce on a bun,

And customers walking by whistling, the good, decent
wallet-ignoring people of the High Plains you read about,
and we sped on, toward Idaho and beyond that,
to the brightening sea, tearful with happiness and love
for one another and for you, Grand Voyager, for you.

1989

Fourteen. *Twenty-Six Below*

Outside the wind feels like a cheese grater
against your cheeks.

You are so hunched from the cold your spine
begins to ache.

But look at Lucy in the snow, rising
time and again
like a sea monster raging through the drifts.

2016

Fifteen. *Admirable Moment*

My dad takes it on the chin from me,
but when challenged I do have
one good memory.

It is late the night of the Fourth of July
and my sick sister Kathy
has fallen asleep on the blanket
on the grass at Cascade Park.

Though the walk to the car was half a mile,
my father bound her to him, and
carried her through the milling crowd.

2008

Sixteen. *Spring Green*

Spring green is not like regular green,
it's more shot through with shafts of gold,
gold that glimmers in the still-angular sun.

It is not sturdy or worried about rain,
it isn't worried about anything.

The grass is like a school of fish
that shift with every drifting breeze.

It is profligate and optimistic --
go ahead, step on our fibrous bodies,
the blades and leaves and buds exclaim --
you cannot crush us all.

The ghosts of winter have been vacuumed away
and all us little faces now
lift up our heads and sing.

2012

Seventeen. *When You Love Someone*

There is always a catch in your throat.

There is always a distance from them like they
are leaving you, you cannot be with them
without thinking of being without them

Because we are designed that way,

Because consciousness works like that.

There is always a sting collecting in the corner of your
eye,

they always seem perfect at that very moment,
even though they are anything but.

They are nothing like you, they have properties
you will never have, and this leap from you to them,
across this yawning pit of difference,
requires courage on your part, faith in the very unlikely.

You were a child inside the screen door hoping
they would rescue you and they did, they saw you
and reached out a hand, and invited you to join them
in their amazing jitterbug.

2015

Eighteen. *Visiting the Farm in Otisville,
Age Seven*

I was struck by the animalness of everything,
the smell of the pigs, the grunting air,
the taste of uncured milk, the sweetness
of hay drying in the loft, the float of feathers
in the chicken coop after a dust-up.
I made special note of the horses' asses,
kind of amazing, with their tails switching the flies.
I was a city boy tiptoeing in the country,
and sometimes I was afraid of the cows at nightfall,
stepping on my feet and I led
their bony backsides back to the barn.
And I was afraid when my cousin Billy Springer,
seeing what a rube I was, stepped barefoot
into a fresh cow pie in the milking barn
and let the sauce rise up between his toes.
I was certain he would be consumed by worms,
if not immediately, then in a month or two,
him grinning because he knew he wouldn't.

1988

Nineteen. *Springtime*

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.

2002

Twenty. *Blame It On The Faultline*

Hearing that the world would end on Easter Sunday
we rented a U-Haul van and drove out to the desert
to not be on the coastline when it slipped into the
ocean.

We parked on a ridge and waited for the rumbling.
Around one o'clock we walked down a jagged line
to a 7 Eleven store on Hwy 69 in Twenty Nine Palms.
"I ain't heard a no earthquake," the proprietor said.
"But the San Andreas runs right up that ridge," he said,
pointing to where we had parked the Econoline.

1971

Twenty-one. *My Dog Lucy Biting Out the
Seat Of My Underpants*

I return home around nine o'clock
And there is Lucy, sitting beside three pairs
of my underpants, with the seat bitten out
of two of them. It's happened again –
upset at being left alone, she attacks the seat
of any underpants she located in the bedroom,
Brings them downstairs, and leaves them at the door.
In the past three years I have had to replace about 40
pair.
I know what you're thinking, but no,
She does this to just-washed underpants as well
as just-worn. This is a serious problem.
She stares at me without a hint of humor.
You just go to your poetry readings, she says with her
eyes.
Just leave me, the dog, to figure out what to do by
myself,
Locked up in this lonely human house.
Don't you imagine for one second there will not
be a price to pay.

2016

Twenty-two.

Miracle Ear

My hearing aid is a tiny thing, a little gray pebble
that fits over the ear, with a little wire sticking out.

It was foolish to take it camping to Bear Head Lake,
where we parked our trailer on a pad of gray pebbles.

In the morning I looked where it should have been
on a little ledge above the trailer sink.

I took the trailer apart, piece by piece, disassembled
the entire structure, searching for that tiny pebble.

And when I pulled the trailer off the pad, I got to my
knees

and asked each little stone on the ground below
if it could help me hear.

We drove home in a blanket of silence, in part because
I couldn't hear, in part because of the shame I felt.

A week later, I come across a trash bag in the garage,
its plastic yellow handles tied in a careful bow.

I pull out the paper towels, the eggshells, potato peels,
orange juice bottle and damp coffee filters.

And there I see my little pebble. I place it in my ear,
I hear the scratchy sound, and say Yes, yes, yes!

2011

Twenty-three. *Horses Work Hard*

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

1989

Twenty-four. *Best Car Radio I Ever Had*

The best car radio I ever had finally died.
I slid a CD in the crack and heard a crunch
and the plastic pieces clogged the slot.
It was a gift in 2003 from my daughter Daniele.
I know it cost \$119 because I found the receipt under the seat.
She bought it with her barista tips,
and had her friend Dirty install it for free.
Dirty (real name Dave) was not a professional installer,
and he got the wires and fuses crossed, so the radio,
while it worked great, caused the car to emit all sort of beeps
and tones
every time you turned the ignition key.
The sounds drove everyone crazy. "Shut the door!" Rachel
would cry,
her hands over her ears. (Shutting the car door caused the
beeping to stop.)
Rachel's ears are super-sensitive while mine can barely hear
at all
-- there's a Jack Spratt and his wife story in there.
But otherwise the radio worked fine.
I set it on public radio most of the time, and played CDs from
my collection,
and music I remember enjoying with Daniele --
the Pogues, the Cowboy Junkies, the Buzzcocks and more.
So when the machine died, five years after she died,

it meant saying goodbye to another part of her.

Can you then imagine my delight when I slid into the driver's seat

at the installation center at Best Buy,

to hear all those stupid beeps and tones again.

"I couldn't get them to stop," said the service guy, wiping his hands on a rag, and I drove away with the sounds I loved.

2013

Twenty-five. *Poetry Should Make You
Miserable*

We did not realize we believed that but --
for 40 years that is exactly what we believed.
In our youth we wrote about heartache
and the shuddering sadness that was ourselves,
When all that while I could have been loving you.
We could have encouraged more laughing,
Spread a banquet for us on the grass
with cake and wine and other good things.
Now we hope to make amends,
Blow balloon animals up for the kids,
Sing happy birthday to every sweet child,
Let grandma go on about the golden days.
We bless the oxygen we cycle between us.
Let's write an epic poem about our tennies.
Stick warm chewing gum under the table,
Make toads pee brown in our hands!
Let's kiss as if there's no tomorrow
And poke fun at everybody's tears!

2000

Twenty-six. *Peggy Palmer*

My sophomore year in high school I discovered
that under the table in study hall you could see the girls'
legs and underwear.

One week I dropped my pencil twenty times to gaze
at Peggy Palmer's knees and thighs,
in her coppery nylons that seemed as taut as mail.

Each time I surfaced on the formica tabletop, like
a pearl diver, gasping,

I would avoid looking into Peggy's eyes. Was she wise to my
activity?

She was either very much aware or not at all,
because she never let on,

with a dead fish face or a slight blushing smile
and if I were a sentry stationed in the ceiling beams
of that cafeteria study hall

I would keep a special eye out for the boys who were unable
to hold onto their writing implements at any table
for even an hour --

look, there goes another! and yet another! --
throughout that hallowed place of learning.

2011

Twenty-seven. *Five Thirty In The
Morning*

I dressed in the dark, and lifted
a basket of recycling to take to the curb.
As I walked down the steps, I became aware
of something moving in my sock.
It was big and heavy and it didn't feel right at all.
Suddenly I was overcome with horror,
convinced it was a centipede that had crawled into
my shoe during the night and was now as frightened
as I was, dancing about as I shook my foot to get clear.
Did I mention it was snowing?
I sat in the snow and pulled off the shoe, and peeled
the nylon sock from my foot.
Holding the sock upside down, I shook out
a quarter onto the snow,
just as the early morning newspaper delivery person
came up the walk. "I had a nickel in my sock," I said,
holding the sock up for him.
"Have a great day," the man with the newspapers said.

2013

Twenty-eight. *Yes!*

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 skin,
each flap of lung a palpitating moth.

Yes, the rumors can all be confirmed,
there are no false prophets.

Whoever you doubted you shouldn't have, nobody lied.

Inanimate objects are quick to protest:

"One need not travel far to know the world."

Self-serving nonsense! Philosophers roam
the length of their attics.

Bearded pudenda!

I say, Go pose for a statue or something.

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 stammer.

Now bite into bread and see even farther,
the steam off the ocean,

the Bedouin's fish, the universe cooling
and turning to glass,
the fly by your ear and the ear of that fly.
Friends say I've lost my grip and I say Yes!
and start to rise,
Friends tell me I am seeing things and I say Yes!

1976

Twenty-nine. *Profound Imbecile*

It's exciting to be ignorant, forever on the crisp
of learning something, anything ...

To get socked in the puss by a thought ...

That is as sweet as pudding dribbling
down one arm.

I take it as an oracle, I press it in a book
like a baby rosebud if you could talk it
into opening up again.

And I smelt it dizzyingly, it went
Into my mind and I smelt it
like the very first arousal around ...
but you know --
you never know --
you know?

2011

Thirty. *Late August*

River dispatches spirit as steam
evaporating in the morning light

The fawns of spring dance
across dew-lipped grass

Bee doesn't know he is
unaerodynamic

and so he bumbles along

2012

Thirty-one. *Holly in the Mountains*

Holly had been pasted in the mouth one too many times by Joe.

So she grabbed the keys to his Ford F250 and headed north and west.

The prairies gave way to the high plains, and beyond the shadow of mountains.

"I am tired of being the victim of life!" she cried out loud in the cab.

She entered Glacier National Park on the eastern end and spun up the road to Mount Henry.

She ground to a halt, jumped out of the truck, and without gear or water began furiously scaling the mountain.

She grunted and panted and never once paused until she had clambered 1500 feet up.

She looked at the rocks and gravel before her and she looked at the scratches on her hands, and sat down and wept.

."It's all the same stuff," she said. "It's just a bunch of scrabble."

Joe was right. Life is work, and your reward is doing more of it.

Then she lowered her hands and saw where she was, at the top of a valley 60 miles long, one giant fellow shoulder to shoulder with the next, a chess set of planets, with smug expressions on impossible faces, each one imperious and placid .

The sun was just setting on the berm of the horizon, its reflections glittering a long string of lakes leading on to forever, and everywhere pine trees mobbing the waters, waving their limbs in unending hosannas.

"Son of a --," exclaimed Holly aloud. "All this time I was looking the wrong direction!"

2012

Thirty-two. *My Heaven*

I lately have realized I don't like anything
as much as watching the dogs play.
They are so fierce and so trusting
and so happy to be horsing around.
If I was to die right now and I was given the choice
I would want to walk in the woods
at just this time of year with my girl Lucy.
She would do her thing and I would walk alongside,
and turning over things I found, the same as her.
And if I could I would ask that my other dogs,
who left me long ago, join with us,
young and impossible, so violently kind
and so grateful to me,
and not some old man in a bathrobe.
And if you say that's a dumb vision of heaven,
fine, it's what I came up with, it's mine.
You figure out your heaven yourself.

2013

Thirty-three. *How To Turn Bad Things Good*

If something bad happens act like you don't quite get it.

Wear that what-the? expression on your face.

That way you never give the thing the satisfaction
of knowing you hurt.

Walk with a distinct rhythm, bouncing slightly as you go,
even if it causes pain or you are a somewhat crippled.

Pretty soon, by definition, you will be dancing.

Love, but be discreet about it.

Everyone twists an open valve -- you look for the tight.

See what the other hands are betting,
then open it up all the way,

so the strong of heart can stand and follow.

2012

Thirty-four. *Prospect Park*

The couple on the bench overlooking the downtown
Appear to be out of sorts, you can see in their faces
they are on the brink with one another.

Uninvited, my old dog Beau saunters up to them,
assuming he will be welcome, because this hill is his.
He approaches gently, a soft smile on his dazed features.
The man and the woman reach out to him,
they lay their hands on his shaggy head and back.

2006

Thirty-five. *Flying Dumbos*

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.

1988

Thirty-six. *Under The Wonderful*

You meet the person you have been waiting for for ever
and not only are you excited but you see
the excitement in them,
in the color of their cheeks and the way you weave
your anxious fingers together.

It is like a store finally stocks the thing
you've been wanting
and you sweep every item off the shelf
and you ask the clerk if there are any more in the back.

You could be walking the road when
the feeling overtakes you
and you start skipping faster than you can run
and it seems downhill because you can't slow down
and it's night and every star is fixed on you,
look, the stars are streaming down your face.

2007

Thirty-seven. *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 a crow-caw,
“THE CLAW!”

as if something were caught in my throat.

The hand would go up, it would cast a dark shadow
on their blue-eyed faces.

They knew devastation was headed their way,
and it was.

The Claw descended, it found their child bellies,
and commenced three seconds of tickling.

What agony it was, writhing under
my stiff-fingered wiggling.

I could feel their wonderful abdominal muscles clench,
and then it was over quite suddenly,

The Claw would suddenly evanesce, like a light switch
Had turned on, the darkness was gone,
and the babes were in my arms again,
and I would blink as if I was just now awakening

after committing some hideous crime.

Where did that thing-person come from?

A radio-drama world where monsters in trenchcoats
blew fart-noises into the tummies
of small children.

The lesson, if one had to be extracted,
was that the world could be a wicked place,
and even loving fathers had a secret side
they sometimes slipped into, despite
mostly good intentions.

On the plus side, The Claw was never around for long,
and we knew this would not be the end of us

1994

Thirty-eight. *The Return Stroke*

Few of us see it this way
But when lightning occurs –
I won't say "strikes" –
It does not appear in the clouds
And then shoot down,
the way our minds tell us it does.
Something does strike, called the leader,
but we do not see it
and it does not light up.
But then, from the ground,
A visible bolt shoots up into the sky.
This is known as the return stroke,
It is the earth talking back, it is
returning the sudden energy
to the storm.
The weather supplies the electricity --
but we supply the light.

2015

Thirty-nine. *The Dogs*

On their sides in the warm grass after running,
tongues swollen, ribs heaving,
eyes focused not on anything around them
but on the job of having run,
the joy of a workout,
there is no death, there never was.
Everything is perfect.

2012

Forty. *Critique*

I slapped the man's manuscript in my hand.

"The truth is, your work strikes me as entirely masturbatory."

He clasped me by the shoulders and a tear rolled down his cheek.

"Finally, someone understands!"

2009

Forty-one. *Identifying Mushrooms ~ North
Arm of the Echo Trail, 2003*

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 tigerfish changing direction.

The phantom glides from stump to stump.

Silvery butterflies like flapping menus.

Tiny acorns tip their hats
to no nutritional value.

2009

Forty-two. *New Tires*

"The blister was inside the tire, big as a football," the mechanic said.

"My God, I said, picturing myself upside-down in a seatbelt, tongue hanging akimbo --

"I could have been killed."

But now, I am safe, riding high on new blackwalls,
the view of the road obscured by my altitude,
eight cylinders pounding in beautiful sequence.

"I can change," I proclaim to the open road, aloud.

"I *will* change."

2011

Forty-three. *Let's Get Lost in the Forest*

Spin around till we lose all direction,
splash two-footed in every rocky stream,
enter the caves of sleeping bears
and wake up the young ones with tickling.
Let us give new names to all the plants,
such as "Deadly Lampshade" and "Worrier's Lips."
Let us eat grubs from moldy tree stumps
and enjoy what I imagine is a chewy texture like clams
and a nutty taste, like toasted pine cone.
But let's take a box of confectioner's sugar
just in case, let us swear eternal love
and seal the covenant with blood.
And when the search party comes
upon our tattered clothes
let us drop from the trees and shout
Hey!

2013

Forty-four. *The Prevalence of Mystery in
Everyday Life*

Consider the flotilla of gallon milk jugs borne along the river,
the tree that emerges green from inside another tree,
that spear of upshooting light glimpsed on a frigid morning,
the bees that invite wasp larvae into the hive,
the way microwaves vibrate the molecules of noodles,
the venom encased in the spur of the platypus,
the search beams circling the mesa sky at night,
the time-space conundra of quantum physics,
the aura of the hand cupped over the flashlight,
the arctic cold of the aerosol shaving cream
as the last foam splutters away

2013

Forty-five. *Heaven After Dark*

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

but after hours is when the fun begins 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 on one
another's skin

and everyone holding on to God's pajama strings.

2008

Forty-six. *Happiness*

When someone is next to the person she loves,
the water in her cells laps at its thousands
of beaches, pebbles and rocks
and sharp discs of light
breathe from the pores of her cheeks.
A whirlpool springs from a cloud to the west,
by a island nesting 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.

Forty-seven. *Little Bighorn*

I walk my boy onto the battlefield.

We pause in the locust grass to read a warning sign:

'Beware of rattlesnakes," it says. "Stay on the path! '

My son's little hand in mine, we climb the ridge

where the warriors appeared on the ridgetop that day

like feathered cougars in the sun.

I point out the crosses in the dirt.

'This is where the soldiers fell -- understand?'

'Yes, daddy, the soldiers stepped off the path

and the rattlesnakes bit them dead!'

1992

Forty-eight. *Rx for Happiness*

Admire your daylilies dailily.

2011

Forty-nine. *Water Hills*

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.

1985

Fifty. *Hand*

Sometimes it is just a gesture
that can change things,
the opening and the outward sweep of the hand,
which seems grandiose in one sense,
“See all I am inviting you to,”
and humble in another,
the stepped-on paw of a creature like yourself.
Such a simple thing, wordless,
hapless, human.
And if the hand should be a well-used one,
one that has been frozen, shaken,
knitted, dirtied, stomped on, rejected, refused,
all the better.
It opens, it invites you,
and you follow.

Fifty-one. *Truth Never Frightens*

a poem by Catherine of Siena

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 –
he 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.

1996

Fifty-two. *At the Metrodome*

Jon and I took our Brazilian houseguest Wilson,
pronounced *Veelsen*, to a Twins game.

Wilson didn't understand much
about force plays and stolen bases.

They are football people down there,
world football, that is to say.

Suddenly a foul ball gets smacked
and it grows as it heads our way

Jon reaches up and snags it one-handed
and without hesitation

places the white ball in Wilson's hands --
That's the kind of son I have.

2001

Fifty-three. *Lucky Bastard*

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 teeming 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 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 up 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."

Fifty-four. *The Dance Of The Dog*

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.

1978

Fifty-five. *The Old Place*

Two bare legs dangling from the bale-door.

The sunflowers craning their necks below.

Twenty years since these boards saw a broom,
and now the mud encloses the roosting beam.

The twitching paw of a dreaming dog
lying in the slag of the outer yard.

Poking through the standing corn,
the rusted body of Eddie's Pontiac.

Uncle Joe awakens to two hornets clutched
and teetering on his wrist.

And from the door we see the terraced fields below,
swelling and snapping, and your mother
in her terry cloth house-coat,
shaking out rugs on the porch.

1983

Fifty-six. *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

1990

Fifty-seven. *Dog Prayer*

In the morning and the night
You are my life's delight
Till I fail and lose my sight
Till I can no longer fight,
And I can't lift my head to bite
Till I am covered up with white,
know it will be all right
I just want to be with you
I just want to be with you
I just want to be with you
I just want to be with you

2004

Fifty-eight. *Happy the Frog*

Suspended animation is a trip.

The grin extends from ear to lip.

The gullet expands and lets one rip.

The legs extend from toe to hip

And into the pea soup, smiling, he slips.

1999

Fifty-nine. *Love Poem for a Woman*

i am like the piano you play that always falters up ahead
a man but also a dog needing something to be brave for
i praise the day you gutted this fish,
and zipped away the offending spine
pull me to bed with you tonight
let me sleep this curiosity off
the way the lion feels for his mate
when she brings him red meat
it's the love of the dog sleeping
curled at the monastery gate

1978

*Sixty. Late March Snowstorm ~ A Hopeful
Sound*

It falls wet and heavy on the house.
I open the drapes and watch it come down,
my eyes on the yard,
where the snow had melted,
filling again with white.
Then I hear it, coming from all sides.
The sounds of robins and cardinals,
returned from the south,
finding shelter in the nooks and branches,
they are singing madly, gladly,
they are happy to be home,
regardless.

2014

Sixty-one. *Addict*

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.

2008

Sixty-two. *I Cry When I Hear 'Wichita
Lineman' on the Radio*

It's the spaciousness of it,
the yearning of the man
high up on the pole,
blades planted against the wood,
and he hears the burble of voices on the lines,
people talking, them telling their secrets,
them sharing their news, though far apart,
and the golden wheatfields stretching out for miles.

2007

Sixty-three. *Remembering 'Sammy Sloth
Goes Out on a Limb'*

A children's book I could not finish
took this creature's endless journey
and stretched it out across 50 cruel pages.
Despised as a sin, he yet embodied redemption,
countering a sluggish metabolism with faith.
Time was not time for him. Deadlines went unmet.
He rowed resolutely, poking through the canopy,
stroke by stroke, through rain, through darkness,
hand over hand and claw by claw,
he said, "I will get to you, somehow or other,"
advancing slowly toward the light.

1987

Sixty-four. *Great Ladder of Being*

On the top rungs are angels and just below, men,
Splendid in reason and shining like gold.

Then come the rest of us --

the blowhards and lepers and crooks.

Then the other species queue up,

the noble ones first, great apes

and great dogs and dolphins and so on

till you get to the bottom rung and the dung

beetles, spirochetes, tapeworms and bugs,

those black blobs of smut that ruin the corn

and finally the rocks and rust and bad atoms

and the sour-tasting air of outer space

and at the lowest rung God is stubbing out a Lucky --

"What, you expected me up top?"

2007

Sixty-five. *A Pat on the Ass From a Flower*

In the documentary *Microcosmos*, the director uses special lenses that allow you to see insects and other tiny creatures in full perspective. You see every bristle on a fly, for instance – the camera is able to show all planes of field.

The movie delights in showing a caterpillar inching up a leaf, or a water strider skipping across water without getting wet, held aloft by surface tension.

My favorite shot was of a honeybee landing on a flower. We know what happens then: the bee extracts the honey while brushing up against the pollen parts of the flower, which it then carries to another location, encouraging new growth through cross-pollination.

But this scene shows how very personal the process is. The bee holds close to the flower's pistil, then sinks a long tongue down the stem, and sucks up the honey like a milkshake. But amazingly there is give and take on both sides, as the flower sends two tendrils around the bee's back, and the tendrils hold the sticky pollen in their "hands," which they massage into the backside of the bee.

It is a scene that is eerily erotic -- the lovee squeezing the rear end of the lover, while tacking a message to its back, an advertisement for itself. There is more of me, it is saying -- more, more. Now share what I am with the vast surrounding meadow!

Sixty-six. *New Friend*

(written a few weeks after meeting Rachel)

in mid-may 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, the bike got
taken, the dog run over,
my credit trashed
but I like my new friend
so pretty and sweet
she makes me so happy
like water flushed with
melting snow
everyone tells me it's true but
I believe it anyway

1975

Sixty-seven. *The Bluffs Overlooking The Sea*

The sun catches our skin like this.

Our eyes are courageous because we are young.

I chase you down the path, kicking sand.

You pretend you don't want to be caught,

I pretend it's open to doubt.

When I catch you we kiss, laughing

with the gulls calling overhead.

We lie in the bent grass. my hand on your waist,

the morning breeze moving us this way and that.

The sun catches our skin like this,

there will be no war forever.

2011

Sixty-eight. *Witnesses*

Three women at Burger King 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 airbrushed 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 across 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 on, which ones seemed interested in the message they carried, and which did not extend them the courtesy of respect.

Then the food arrives, hamburgers, cokes and fries, and the women in their Sunday clothes bow their heads and pray.

1990

Sixty-nine. *Dog Halfway on Bed*

She knows she's not allowed on
and she would never cross
that line of prohibition
but that doesn't mean
she won't cheat.

Look at her, standing on her back legs
with her body draped over the comforter
arms stretched out straight like a sphinx
so that her body is at a perfect right angle,
uncomfortable-looking and yet
you can hardly hear her snore.

2014

Seventy. *Selling My Dog to the Circus*

I took my poodle dog to the circus to sell her.

While I haggled with the ringmaster, Lucy wandered through the stalls, sniffing the elephants and bears.

The horses snorted and paced to one side, unimpressed.

On the other, a circus poodle ambled by on its hind feet in a pink tutu and top hat, an insane grin pasted on its face.

I could tell Lucy was dubious about the whole enterprise.

When I was unable to convince the circus of her acrobatic abilities, we drove home in silence, her sitting high in the back seat.

"Why did you put me through that?" she asked. "I have never been so embarrassed. You know I'm no acrobat."

I pleaded my case. "I thought a change would be good for both of us. I know that you have a yen for the glamorous life."

She placed her head between the seat back and the window, watching the store lights go by.

"I hate my legs," she said.

2015

Seventy-one. *Icky*

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'

1986

Seventy-two. *Toothbrush*

My brother and I peed into the toilet,
our streams dueling one another,
the amazing hydraulics of a seven and nine year old.
Then we brushed our teeth and Pat bumped me
and my toothbrush sprang into the unfurnished water.

If we flushed away the evidence it might
break our grandparents' pipes.
If they came upon it they would surely be annoyed.
I had made up my mind
I was not going in after it.
Grandpa Lawrence, thin and diabetic,
stood in the doorway and without a word
knelt and retrieved the dripping toothbrush.
We'll get you a new one, he said quietly,
and rinsed his hands.
We didn't know he was a farmer
who lived his whole life in piss.
But we gaped at each other, the way kids do,
realizing someone was wholly on our side.

Seventy-three. *After the Rain*

Sometimes when it stops
you can scan the faces
and understand them a bit
That man with his wife's umbrella,
people put up with him
and that's about all he gets
The girl in the rain boots
wishes she weren't pretty,
at least not all the time
There is a fellow, hands in pockets
who does not know what
to do with himself
And that other guy, bug-eyed
in the reflection, disturbing people
oh, wait, that's me

1999

Seventy-four. *Teaching My Dog To*
Read

It has been a slow process,
her eyeing the page,
then licking the page,
then looking up at me.
It does not help that she cannot say the sounds,
not having the proper anatomy.
Still I'm patient we will get to that in time.
Because when you love someone,
and you know that they love you,
you want them to read your books.

2017

Seventy-five. *Big Ass Angels*

Beauty has always distracted us from the truth.
Adam was deceived by Eve. Was she good
or did she just look that way? A man never knows.
Artists likewise get taken in. Given a choice
between naked beauties to model the saints
and lumpy people from around town, you know
which way they're going to go.
Women of the world, take heart! from the knowledge
the masters could not see,
that no one is prettier than anyone else.
The eyes tell lies, what we call beauty is just temptation.
Help is coming, dearest friends. A bell will sound
and all will know what we hoped was true,
but could not bring ourselves to believe.
We are beautiful, lovely ones — oh, so beautiful.
And then we are beautiful beyond even that.

2010

Seventy-six. *The Eyes of a Child*

At the video store with Daniel, three years old.

She runs up to me holding a movie

The movie is 10, with B Derek jogging toward you
on the cover, in corn braids and flesh-colored swimsuit,
her breasts going bi-koi-doing.

"Look daddy," she cries out to everyone in earshot --

"It's Mommy!"

People throughout the store look at me
with unprecedented respect.

1987

Seventy-seven. *Zeppo & Ollie*

When the girl died, the dog had nowhere to go.

Several people offered to take him,

but more to do a kind thing than

because they wanted him.

Then Ollie mentioned that he would take little Aleppo,

the only dog he ever liked even a little.

For several weeks Ollie cared for the dog,

who seemed grateful but aloof, sleeping

on the other side of the room,

missing the mistress he loved so much.

One night Ollie woke up because

the dog had come over to him in the dark,

he was licking and licking Ollie's face and cheeks,

he was licking and licking as if he finally got it,

he lashed and lashed the man out of love.

2009

Seventy-eight. *The Boards of Spring*

Be joyful as you climb the steps --
put spring in your toes and the treetops.
You are measured out for these green sleeves
and boxed in by these exigencies.
God gave you big bells so give them a shake.
let them bong to the striking clock.
Say oh what a beautiful day
as if you were Gordon McCrae

Seventy-nine. *The Rapture*

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 boundless optimism
Until we step into a clearing
And see the turquoise
plastic Port O Potty.

2002

Eighty. *Your Human Being*

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.

1977

Eighty-one. *Vindaloo 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 ponderousness 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 Vindaloo. 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."

1996

Eighty-two. *As We Get Older We Become*
Poets

We forget the names
of things we should know
That thing over there, it's a --
What *do* you call a thing like that?
Don't tell me, it's on the tip of my tongue
When in fact it's light years from my tongue
But the more we forget the more we become
like poets, each moment is new to us,
the impossible now just waking up
and stretching in sunlight
everything strange
and unknown

2000

Eighty-three. *Browsers*

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.

1977

Eighty-four. *Why the Dog Ate the Dictionary*

Maybe she wanted to hurt me
for leaving her alone.

It was her only chance to talk back to words.

Or maybe it smelled like my hand.

1981

Eighty-five. *Lullaby*

Rest your drowsy cheek,

My child, 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

That can never 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.

1985

Eighty-six. *Trempealeau*

This Wisconsin meets the Mississippi here in a series of steep bluffs. The name of the place comes from La montagne qui trempe à l'eau -- mountain with wet foot in the water.

I love the name. It contains tremble, temple, trample and tremolo. When I was young I visited Veronica at her farm in Trempealeau County, the rolling hills that sheep tumbled down, the hills that tipped over tractors.

Veronica and my brother Brian threw frisbee in the corn, and what was noteworthy was that Veronica played barefoot and naked, her breasts bobbing wildly with every joyful, laughing toss.

Thirty years later I ask my brother his favorite memory in life. "Playing in the corn with Veronica in Trempealeau," he said.

"I never felt so forgiven or so loved."

1995

Eighty-seven. Third Happiest Moment

I was nine, playing in the Amherst, Ohio, Little League. I wasn't terrible. I was good at flies and grounders. But during a game I tended to clutch, like I was in the spotlight, and everything depended on me casually enveloping the ball.

Invariably, however, my heart would speed up and I would quickly time travel to thirty seconds later, the kids slapping me on the back with their gloves and loving me. Provided I caught the ball, which I often did not.

It's the final inning now. I am in left field, swatting my Billy Pierce-autographed glove. Some kid hits a high fly. It is the kind that goes up, up, up and it then goes down, down, down – right where I was standing.

I could feel my heart rising in my throat, feeling the beat pounding against my larynx. I look up and I am lost. I sort of see the ball, but not really.

Again I time machine to thirty seconds from now, but now it is a dark moment in history. My friends are throwing their gloves in the dirt in disgust. No one talks to me on the way home.

I get dizzy now, and I seem to be swimming in my uniform, which is suddenly several sizes too big, The sleeves encompass me, the pantlegs trip me up. The grass in left field seems a foot tall and loaded with grasshoppers. I turn my back to the ball and stumble to my knees.

And then I feel it. The ball landing in the hollow of the glove. A one-handed, back-to-the-plate catch. I quickly put my other hand on the ball to hold it in, and struggle to my feet, my pants nearly falling down.

The umpire, an alcoholic like my dad, signals out. We win. The kids on my team, who usually groan when the ball goes my way, leap into the air and shout Yay. I stagger to the dugout, players clapping me on the back with their mitts.

I want to slow time down and tell everyone about each tick of the clock as I stood out there in the dying sunlight. But good judgment overtakes me, and I keep my counsel. We get ice cream at Zimmerman's and I keep my mouth shut. But I am dying to brag.

Gradually people turn to other topics. They are drifting from the moment. On the ride home, I false-modestly announce from the back seat to my dad and brother, "Boy I was as surprised as anyone by that catch!"

But no one wants to hear. I tend to wear people out with my consciousness.

But I kept the game ball. And all the way home I toss it from one hand into the well-oiled pouch.

The catch was a fluke. I had no idea where that ball was. If anything, it caught me. But it went into the books as my great catch, forever.

1999

Eighty-eight. *Second Happiest Moment: The
Bioluminescent Woman*

Out on Mosquito Bay under a grinning half moon

The oars of the kayaks flash brilliantly.

These are the bioluminescent waters of Vieques
reportedly the shiniest of the kind in the world.

But tonight, which is St. Patrick's Night,
the moon is too bright for the full effect.

So Rachel heaves herself over the edge
and slides into water said to be populated
by bull sharks and hammerheads.

But she transforms into a flashing angel
lighting up the water around her,
treading water like an aquatic butterfly.

That's my bioluminescent woman
down there, an amazement only
to those who do not know her

2011

Eighty-nine. The Happiest Moment

Five-month-old baby sitting on floor, in our apartment
in Milwaukee, 1985. Father, wanting to play with her.

He wads up an athletic sock into a ball and then,
Rollie Fingers-style, reaching way back, winds up
and pitches the ball to her.

As the sock sails across the room, he thinks,

Oh, no, I am striking my infant daughter with a
projectile,

I belong in a spidery prison. But the ball strikes
the baby's onesie and rolls softly to a stop.

Then the sound begins to tumble out of the child,
volley after volley of infant giggling,

like a passel of baby ducks wobbling and quacking,
it is a sound I never had heard before,

peals of laughter manufactured in the brain
of the person my drop of seed created,

and I thought, I did that, I made that happen
and as long as I live I want to make it happen again.

1985



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