

A photograph of the Moon's surface. In the foreground, a person in a white space suit stands next to a large, dark, irregularly shaped rock. The person is facing away from the camera, looking towards the horizon. The ground is covered in fine-grained lunar soil and small rocks. In the background, the horizon line is visible against a black sky filled with numerous stars. The overall lighting is dim, with the primary light source being the stars and the ambient light reflecting off the lunar surface.

FINLEY

Bee on the Moon

Mike Finley

Bee on the Moon

Kraken Press, St. Paul

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Lullabye

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

Glue-Girl

First glimpse of the child sent to replace me
Is of glassine bone and milky skull.
Two hearts quicken, ages in ages yawn.
Doctors chat and diddle buttons,
Knead the image squirming on their monitors –
A handful of centimeters from ulna to shoulder,
The gauge of the brain-pan,
The auspicious twelfth rib.
There the heart, like a tulip sprouting from the chest,
The kiss-blowing machine, the plunge
Of its pumping, the determined sucking
Already underway.
The astronaut, wound round its cord,
The slack-eyed hero, the virtueless saint
Is selfing itself into light.
I gasp, from fear.
Little glue-boy, little glue-girl,
What will you come to?
No peace, no peace.
Your home all storm, a tempest of blood,
And in all that ocean one swimmer is stroking,
Stroking and stroking,
Keen to the sound
Of thunder underwater.

Fuzzy Black Riding Helmet

For six years, between her ninth and fifteenth birthdays, I drove Daniele Saturday mornings to a series of riding academies along the St. Croix River. She always rode English style. We bought her a felt riding helmet with a fuzzy top surface, a smart black jacket, and some riding pants and boots. I came upon the helmet today, high on a shelf in her bedroom closet.

Daniele liked riding. And she loved the horses themselves, though she drew back from the basic skill of jumping. Plagued all her life with a variety of phobias, she would get right up to the rail and come to a stop, every time. Some of the instructors were understanding. Others held it against her, and we would have to find another stable to take lessons. She never received the coveted certificate of completion, though the academies took thousands from us.

When she was 15, she tried Zoloft, a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor or SSRI. She had been seeing psychologists and psychiatrists since she was nine, for mood disorders, phobias, and panic attacks. But she had never taken an antidepressant.

The drug worked for a time, but then its effects wore off. She could take more and more, but not get the desired effect, relief from the constant feelings of fear, which she once described to me as “always drowning.”

She had been taking the drug for over a week, with no indication of anything happening. But now, watching her cantering in circles on the sawdust, I saw her change. Instead of riding loosely, the reins slack, her shoulders hunched, she leaned forward, hugged the horse between her knees, and advanced toward the rail.

The horse leaped up, Daniele bore down, the jump was a success. She paused to encouragingly slap the horse on the neck, then circled for another jump. She jumped perhaps 20 times that Saturday morning, and we rode back to St. Paul together quietly, a fierce look of pride on her face.

I told her mother what I saw, and how marvelous it was to see our daughter take control of the young mare and will it up over the rail, completely balanced.

And then the effect went away, and Daniele slipped back into her realm. We were almost near the end, anyway. Not many girls keep up with riding as they reach puberty and are distracted by other things. She was creating a new self for herself even then, a young woman armoring against her fear with tools of her own devising – brave clothes, brave hair, brave make-up and puncturings.

The armor worked better and lasted longer than the Zoloft did. I came to see that she had remade herself into someone who was never afraid – because she had to, to stay alive.

And I wonder, was the girl I saw doing that the real girl? Or was it just momentary courage from a dissolving pill? Who was the girl I saw hold the horse close to her, reins held tight, the sound of leather stretching, the two of them leaving the ground and sailing over the bamboo rod?

The Eyes of a Child, 1987

At the video store with Daniele, three years old.

She runs up to me holding a movie

The movie is 10, with Bo Derek jogging toward you on the cover,
in cornbraids and flesh-colored swimsuit,
her breasts going boi-yoi-yoing.

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

"It's Mommy!"

People throughout the store look at me with unprecedented
respect.

In The Night

My little girl awoke in quaking with fright,
and I held her and explained
that the monsters were gone,
they were never there at all,
and the look she gave me was, I recall,
almost one of pity, as if

I were the doomed one, mine the swift
tumble coming soon.

I rocked her to sleep in her room
and thought of every plane
I wanted to see go down,
every siren shearing the dark
were heading toward my part
of town, my god, and all I
have is a child to protect me.

Giant Eyeball

I don't know what to do with it, the giant eyeball in the garage.

Every time I clean up back there, I come across it, still in the manufacturer's box.

It is actually a bowling ball – a novelty bowling ball I bought online for Daniele in 2007. She had taken up bowling at the Bryant Bowl and Memory Lanes. It's a great way to pal around and drink beer with your friends, and pretend you are getting exercise.

So I thought, she would like this eyeball bowling ball. It's trippy, a conversation starter. And it would help her game – no more searching the racks for a ball light enough, that also fits your fingers.

So I gave it to her for Christmas. She didn't come to the house so I delivered it to her apartment steps, still in the box, wrapped in a red bow.

I called her later and she seemed delighted. “Amazing,” was how she described it. And brought it back to me: “How many dads buy their kids giant eyeball bowling balls?”

“I didn't have the fingerholes drilled.” I said, “because I didn't know your finger size, or how far apart your fingers are. But I checked around and most alleys have a ball shop that will do that for you.”

So for months after that, when we got together, I might refer to it, casually. “Been bowling lately?”

“Yes I have,” she would say, smiling broadly at me and poking a thumb in the air. She was happy to give me that satisfaction.

But when she died, and I cleaned out her apartment, I found the

ball still in its box. It was inviolate: it had never been rolled, never hit a pin, never had the fingerholes drilled.

I don't know. Maybe going bowling was just a joke she told me, a dodge I was too dumb to see through. Or maybe it was an item of such reverence, or such value as a knickknack on her coffee table, that she spared it from actual use. Bowling bowls do take a beating.

When I come across it now, I don't know what to do. It's weird enough, and funny enough, that it would look interesting on the piano, or fireplace.

But something about the eye is unnerving. It never blinks. It doesn't miss a trick.

So five years later, I have never brought it in from the garage.

Nine ~ A Birthday Rhyme

I think it must be exceptionally fine
To discover oneself at the ripe age of nine.
Nine is so swift on the hoof and so fleet,
Nine is so hard on the growing of feet.
Nine is so elegant, ermine and silk.
Nine is so everyday, chocolate milk.
Nine is so ancient, the product of eons.
Nine is so modern, an apex to be on.
Nine is so stalwart, so bold and so brave.
Nine is timid, crouched in a cave.
Nine is exemplary, a regular role model.
Nine is tight jeans that make you waddle.
Nine is the age to explore many areas.
Nine is the age to think life is hilarious.
Awkward and clumsy and falling downstairs,
Graceful and delicate, walking on air.
Halfway to womanhood, working, and college,
Think of the expertise, think of the knowledge!
Think of your doddering, slobbering father
Who always thought you could walk on water.
Nevertheless, here you are, here am I.
Who could be prouder, who makes me cry?
I would do anything you ask me to,
Quack like an elephant, shout like the dew,
Save you from earthquake and mudslide and viper,
Save you from having to launder a diaper.
Save you from heartache and meanness and strife

All of the days of the years of your life.
I'll save you from all these things while you're nine.
Because I will always want you to be mine.
I've done a couple of things halfway well,
But my very best we named Daniele.

Jar in Tennessee

A month after the operation, we are out again. Imagine a crisp winter morning. I am walking Beau at Crosby Farm alongside the Mississippi, an undeveloped park with lots of paths cutting through the trees along the shore. A perfect place for a scofflaw to let his dog run wild.

And I have a minicassette recorder in my pocket, a generic blisterpack Sony. They are great for taking notes when driving, or out for a walk somewhere. Sometimes people see you and think you are schizophrenic, talking to your hand, but that is small price to pay, in my mind, for being able to "write" on the fly.

The morning is gorgeous, with crisp new powder everywhere, and white vapor rising from the river. For just a moment, a four-point deer poked his head into a clearing. Beau, being a bit blind, pays him no mind.

My dog begs me to chase him. It's his favorite game, a role reversal because chasing others is the center of his life otherwise. My knee is still sore, but I pound along for a hundred yards or so, bellowing like a dog-eating bear. He adores that.

We take several switchbacks, going deeper into the trees. When we arrive at the riverbank, I feel in my pocket for the recorder. It's gone.

You know how when something is gone you check every pocket eleven times to make sure it's gone? This was that kind of gone. I figure I either dropped it when I made my last note, or it fell out of my pocket during the little jog. So I begin backtracking. The dog wants me to chase him some more, but my mood is darkening and I decline.

The snow is thick, but there are many deer and rabbit and human footprints. A recorder could easily vanish into any of them. I calculate in my mind the loss of the unit – maybe \$40. Besides, they wear out quickly because you are always dropping them. I look everywhere I walked – about a two-mile distance – for the little machine. No luck.

I was nearly reconciled to the loss when I spotted the unit lying on a patch of thin snow. The battery and tape compartments were both sprung open, and the tape and batteries lay splayed out on the snow, as if a squirrel or crow had given some thought to taking them home, and then said, nah.

I popped the machine back together and pushed the play button, still ready for the worst, a dead unit. But instead I heard my own voice. I was talking about Sao Paulo Brazil, which I had visited on business a couple months earlier. On the tape, I was sitting in a bus on a smoggy artery heading out of town, talking to myself about the beggars crouched by the highway signs, and the advertising, with the nearly naked models, and the infinite pastel rows of high-rise apartment buildings.

And now I am standing in a clearing in the forest, 7,000 miles away, hearing my high, sped-up voice. The woods are so quiet that this little machine and its tinny little speaker ring clear through the air. Nearby crows, hearing my recorded chatter and finding it suspicious, take wing and flap away to a safer bough.

If you have ever stood between two mirrors and seen the illusion of infinite regression in them, you have an idea what I was feeling, addressing myself electronically from a place so different and so far away.

And if that was not stunning enough, I flipped the tape over – I did not want to tape over this interesting travelogue – and

there was my daughter Daniele's voice, talking to a caller on the phone. I reuse my answering machine tapes in my hand recorder, and this tape was perhaps five years old, when my little girl was eight, back before we got Beau. She died this year, at age 25. But on the tape her voice sounds so clear, so young and lovely. I had forgotten what she sounded like as a child. I knew I couldn't tape this over, either.

Beau, meanwhile, was looking at me with that panting grin dogs wear when they are in their element to the hilt. But the look on his face just now is all wonderment and admiration. He "understands" very little that I do, but this latest trick, picking something up in the woods and having it talk to me in my own voice, takes the cake.

My friends, let me tell you, this is not the end of my story. Beau has a lifetime of adventures ahead of him, with Daniele and me. Dogs to run with, people to love. At one point he gets to paddle in a canoe, with a life jacket on. Disasters rain down upon our house, and the sun comes up afterward and dries the rain up. Beau catches a bunny, and lets it live. Beau is struck by a car one night – and it lets him live.

But I choose to end our story here, in the woods, kneeling by the fallen minicassette recorder.

It was the look I saw in Beauregard's eye, the look of a knowing one, a holy of holies at last. He had made the difficult crossing, from a crazy, impulsive, demanding animal to one who saw, and enjoyed, the life we shared.

Wallace Stevens wrote a simple poem called "A Jar in Tennessee," about coming upon a human artifact on a wild hillside. Placing anything human in the wilderness changes everything, just like in the time travel stories. The consciousness

is contagious. Just as owning a dog is a kind of portage, in which your soul enters the dog forever and vice versa – a miracle.

It's entirely likely, since he is a French poodle, and Stevens is the poet of that breed. And it was such a gorgeous day, with the scent of sand and pine adrift in the air like microfine confetti in the morning breeze.

1997

2 a.m.

I awakened
to your sobbing

Don't cry I said
though I knew what it was

and I knew don't cry
is useless advice

I patted you
and thumped your back

like a drum
in the covers

as if the sounds
from the heel of my hand

passed through
in waves

I wanted the vibrations
to set up a hum

and pass through us
like a shout through water

and take it
outside us forever

Weather

The day of the death it began to drizzle
and people arrived at the door stamping their feet
to be rid of the wet.

It had hardly rained all summer.

An hour before the funeral the sun came out
and a soft breeze arose from the west.

People took off their jackets
and hung them on the backs of chairs.

In the middle of the night on Tuesday
the heaving thunder woke us up.

We ran through the house
lowering windows.

Then stood on the porch
as the rain came down,
rain by the oceanful,
pounding the boulevard,
blasting the neighborhood,
choking the gutters,
running and rushing
to rejoin the river.

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'

Return of the Prairie Falcon

When a bird flaps and flies
no one cries.

Why demand that anything stay
when we are all going away?

And when we return
the hurting heart may burn
because something gone now
shows its face,
and that moment blesses this place.

The Gift

You try to form a syllogism
but you can't turn the corner on it.

It begins with enormous loss
that crashes you to the ground.

It takes months to suggest
that loss is some kind of gift

And what is that gift exactly --
authority on the topic of pain?

What good is it to be an expert
on knowledge people run from?

What sort of gift is tears and who
will form a line to receive it?

Skedaddle

You were the poet, not me.
I was just trying to hold onto my own,
to maintain, you were the one
willing to slit the rope
and sail out into someplace new.

I thought if I made you famous
you would go on living,
and if no one forgot you
then you never went away.

I failed because the world
can't bear the truth
that every daughter ever born
is already gone.

Forgive me my girl.

You gave me a look that said
I was no longer your parent
that said none of it matters,
the thing that is so important.

There is no saving, there
is no rescue to be made.
if you save me you are only saving me
from the journey I must be on.

I say this with a smile,
the most loving one I know,
come away with me now,

Come dance in the mountain
where the stones shiver
and the monsters slam the bar

and the old songs
drift like smoke
in the crackling air

Expletives

I didn't use to swear so much
in the days before Daniele died.

I considered it beneath me,
ill-considered, crude, a resort resorted to

unnecessarily, what with me being a poet
and having that great vocabulary.

But since then I have felt a kind of peace
with ugliness, and the terrible words

are always there for me to fling,
like rotten fruit lying on the ground

so that now, when I scoop them up
they are comfortable as new socks

or like old friends who meet up again
and promise this time to keep in touch

because in a dumb world in which
we are only allowed to say so much

these words have power, like the poker
that stirs a dying fire back to life

and when I give them the OK sign
I release them back into the noxious air,

the air that they so perfectly,

so satisfactorily describe

Spitting On Sandwiches

My daughter and I watched Fast Times at Ridgemont High, in 2007.

I asked her, since she worked in restaurants, if she ever saw anyone spitting on a sandwich, like the guy in the picture.

"Sure, hundreds of times," she said.

"You're kidding."

"Daddy, I've done it."

"Why?"

"When someone acts like a real douche, or puts his hand on your leg, or you remember he left no tip the last time he ate there -- you respond."

"Is it a common practice?"

"We had one cook, he did it to every single burger going out. He did it to everyone, sight unseen. But he only worked there for a year."

A Sentence

(FOR MY DAUGHTER, FOR SOMEDAY, 1994)

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

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

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

1994

What She Would Say

Each time I see you sad
I feel worse inside
I wish you could see
I just had a bad day
I'm sorry it hurt you
But I was hurting too.
Time to kick out the chocks
And let me roll free

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.

Balloons

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

1985

The Disappeareds

Suddenly they are gone,
swallowed by their shame,
swallowed by the mountain that took them in
and then sealed them away.

Torturers know that no one withstands pain.
You may put up a brave face for a while
but it quickly becomes unbearable
and you will say anything then.

No one looks the same at you now.
You are that one,
the one who knows,
that no one wants to know.

Was it a virus?
A taking of hostages?
Did it only take the feeling,
the ones who could not look away?

Was it a warning from the world
that this is the price we must pay now,

one sacrificed by the hour
until we learn to love.

When you see a person
sobbing in the supermarket,
face held in their hands,
another one has been taken.

2015

Hopscotch

I knew in an instant
she was there, and there, and there
The being small, under radar
where love clambers in the umber
We take turns like Merlin
inside every creature
No membranes, no padlocks
to hinder the leaping
The mole makes castles underfoot
Crane sharpens bill on a log
A duck cannot fly without flapping
Mosquitoes explode like kisses in the air
And suddenly everything
waves its hands and says hi

There Is a Kingdom

of people who don't like who they are,
though the birds sing there
with every kind of flower.
No one knows how they got this way.
Some say they live under a witch's curse.
Some say they drank from a poisoned well.
Some say the people are sinners from another life,
and this life is their punishment.
Some even say these people are the scapegoats
from every other kingdom
where the people don't care
who suffers for them,
and the music and dancing
in those lands go on.

I Heard Her Call My Name ...

Just now, outside the bedroom and
I remembered how quick I used to respond to her cries
because I knew how afraid she got
and me being there seemed to help.
But now it is a surprise just to hear her voice,
she who is so lost to me, who is so gone.
What is that catch in her voice trying to tell me?
And what, if I got to my feet and pushed open that door,
would be waiting there to see me?

2011

A Monk at the Door

One summer morning the doorbell woke me.
When I opened the door, there was a man in a Tibetan robe,
wearing Buddy Holly frames.
He was a chaplain from the Minneapolis Police Department.
He read from a piece of paper in his hand.
He told me that my daughter had been found dead in her room.
Then I had to tell my wife.
Rachel, a man downstairs ... says Daniele ... has died.
This really happened. It was August 18, 2009.
Within moments of hearing my daughter was dead, God died,
too.
I had put all my trust in his faithfulness.
I knew we were on a journey,
a journey I could not understand.
But I trusted God to see us through.
I prayed every day for protection for Daniele,
from the dangers that surrounded her life.
And so God began to shrink, to collapse to a dot.
I could see him disappearing into air.
I could hear his tiny voice calling out: goodbye.
The day of the funeral, a beautiful hawk perched on our
backyard lines.
A dozen people looked up as it surveyed us, shrugged,
and flew away over the garage.
Sometimes in the fall, down by the river bluffs,
I see eagles. And herons. And ducks.
Always, a curious sensation that they are not just birds,
they are messengers somehow.
Here I am, they are saying. I am here. I am everywhere.
Winter was hard. Rachel went away. Friends stopped calling.
They were sick of my stories.

I sat and watched the satellite and I drank.
Sometimes I was so angry I would argue all day
with the people who no longer called.
Behind their backs I told them the truth to their faces.
Spring came, the trees leafed out and blossomed.
One day I heard a tapping in the dining room.
A robin had returned and flown in the back door,
and now was leaping over and over again into the same sealed
window.
The bird was frantic, afraid and exhausted.
I fetched a plastic Walmart bag from the pantry
and slipped it over the frightened bird.
As gently as I could I placed the bag on an open planter in the
back yard.
The bird sat paralyzed, unblinking, one wing cocked awry.
I left the bag and bird alone, and when I returned minutes later,
the bag was empty ... the bird was gone.
And for the first time I found myself wondering about
something ...
If God was truly gone ...
if nothing mattered and the universe wasn't just a snide joke
at the expense of the conscious ...
then why was that man on the porch,
with the stubbly scalp and the stubbly chin and the stammering
affect ...
and why was he wearing saffron robes?
And why has that color ...
the color of the embalmed body, but also the sign of surprise
been everywhere I look?

2010

Molly in the Door

I went to the door and there was my daughter.
The sun was shining behind her
so I could barely make out her face
but I could see she was healthy
and strong and happy.
Hi Pops, she slugged me,
the way she always did,
and she gave me the biggest hug.
She held me in my arms and spun me slowly around,
spun her old man around,
rocking me on my feet.
I was astonished at her musculature
and the bright look in her eye,
it was joyous, and fearless
like she had been paddling a canoe in the sun
with good friends for a year.
I held on and began to cry ...
I woke up.
At first I was sad because it wasn't true,
my daughter wasn't really alive,
I would never hold her and swing her like that, again.
But then I thought this
is how she might be now,
easy and forgiving and strong as a horse,
and I began to laugh
the same way she used to laugh,
eyes closed, top teeth showing,
like a semi-moon on a starless night,
letting it out in one exhalation,
holding nothing back.

Pluses and Minuses of the Suicide of a Child

The first thing is, you realize
you never have to worry about that one again.
The play is complete, the suspense has passed,
the horrors that lay likely ahead --
the crimes, disappointments, the late-night calls,
the tears, the setbacks,
a phonebook of pain and destruction --
can be allowed to close.

It occurs to you that people who used to share their problems
with you,
Their momentary heartaches and worries,
They're never going to bother you again, or ask for your
sympathy.
For a brief time that seems like a relief, too --
until you miss being useful that way.

Eventually you learn you are still quite attached
to the person in question and that you can't help continuing
the conversation that you of you were having,
and then were untimely interrupted.
You go to them for consultation, when you are by yourself,
Driving, or shaving in the mirror,
because that person knows everything now,
that person has nothing better to do
than to go on being part of you.

But it's no good really.
Those you still love must look into your eyes every day
and be silent about the cavity

that has opened up among you,
the face that cars and buildings
and trunks of trees are sliding into the ravenous,
groaning, foothold-killing thing.

And because you love them
you give them your best,
and reassure them the way you did
from the beginning, from the earliest, happiest days.
"Sweetest ones, I brought you in,
Let me help you out. it's going to be all right."

Losing a Daughter Is Like Being a Bee on the Moon

Every morning you wake up shivering
gazing out at the darkened spires,
wondering where is a flower
in this barren land that you
can draw some sweetness from.

2011

Take the Worst Thing

Take the worst thing that ever happened to you
and instead of being destroyed by it
make it your cornerstone,
a source of power.

Find a way to think of it as a wonderful gift,
the thing that defines you and sets you apart.
Say, if I can survive this and learn from it,
I will wake up every day singing.

Ghost in the House

I am the ghost who lives in this house.
Every night I give you my kiss.
I cover your sleeping face with my hands.
I look into your eyes with tenderness.

I am the ghost who lives in this house.
The floorboards creak where I stand.
I wait at the window, drapes flowing.
I speak with the moon like a friend.

I am the ghost who lives in this house.
The new people come and they go.
The secret I cannot convey to them --
That I lived and loved and knew.

2011

What a Rotten Thing to Say

'It's not a boy, but it's better than nothing' -- Overheard at a shower

It is an earthquake in the heart of a man
when he fathers a daughter.

Overnight there is a creature of wonder come into the world,
a baby woman issued out of your own loins.

There is a year-long period where she cannot talk
but she keeps talking anyway, slapping a wooden spoon --

Bar bar ar ar bar bar bar bar ...

with no shortage of certainty, in a voice to command armies
and choirs,

issuing orders to all within range, letting them know
who is in charge of this house.

And when she is taken from you, because the world is useless
and has no idea how to love, even after the moon
falls out of the sky and crashes through the roof,
and you stare at all the splintered sticks,
even after such a thing you want to say to every man listening,
those foolish men sucking their cigars,
the wisdom she imparted on the day of revelation:

Bar bar ar ar bar bar bar bar ...

Have a daughter and love that little girl --
only she can make you into a man.

2009

Ophelia

I feel you and I feel you feel me too.
I want to ask you how one floats laded down
with so much information?
Every thing that doesn't kill us
makes us sadder,
Like an astronaut on a tinfoil tether
You drift away from me and everyone.
Like a mermaid tangled in a net,
you have given up
gasping for good.

2009

Teaching Her to Drive

Because she was phobic, it took us six years.
She was afraid of oncoming cars,
so afraid she put her hands up when they passed.
I had to find places where she felt safe,
so I chose cemetery roads,
with their strange curves,
and mourners making their way back to their cars,
white kleenex against black clothing.
We graduated to suburban lanes, practicing every Saturday,
month after month, until I let her drive us back into the city
the length of South Lyndale Avenue.
Three times she failed her exam,
and each time I encouraged her.
Everyone fails a couple of times, I said.
You'll get it, don't worry.
But I was shaking the fourth time out,
exiting the car and fretting over how she would take
a fourth failure.
After the exam she sat in the car with the instructor
for what seemed like an hour.
When she stepped out, she walked across the blacktop
toward me, a grin slowly forming on her face,
and I broke down blubbing,
tears running into my mouth, thinking,
This will change everything.

2010

When Family Members Die

The mother makes you weep because all mothers are Greek
and they do not know but they suffer so.

The father makes you sigh because of all that never was.

Fathers are foolishness given a voice

that then has nothing to say.

A son would be like being smitten by a smith,

a hot hammer hitting you on the head

like nothing could be, pray God could never be.

But a daughter is the end, it is the man turned inside out --

his soul become a flower, his one shot at beauty.

2010

Baby Danger

The night the baby was born,
And the midwife left,
And our friends finished off the champagne,
We wrapped it twitching in a white cloth
And set it between our bodies in the bed.
Sleeping rigid as steel bars,
Terrified we'd roll upon the being
And smother the life,
And dreamed of it sliding to its death
Under dark waters,
Dreamed it fell from countertops,
Chairs, cracked like eggs on the baked varnish
Of the world.
We dreamed of leaving it exposed
And found it blue and chapped upon snow,
Or turning one moment and looking back
To the crib rocking emptily, emptily,
All of our reasons
Suddenly missing.
There was a decade of our lives or more
When we could lie down upon cold tracks
And drink and nod off
And not worry about morning.

Now everything is heat,
And distant thunder.
The moon puts its shoulder to the shade,
Peering in like the dumbstruck
Passenger on
Two frightened adults
And a small sleeping girl.

Since She Died

I am in a restaurant
unwrapping a napkin
when for no reason the people
stop sipping coffee,
become monster babies
from a monograph of freaks
cyclops baby, girl with no brain,
hour-old faces that didn't quite
make it, dry eyes crossed
with expectation of death.
I wish I could salve this feeling
like I butter a roll,
but bitterness is not a face you make
its roots punch through you
and tangle the heart.
Families are joined together
like paper dolls,
then pulled apart at the arms,
and the rest of the village,
well-issued and well-nourished
with all the right parts
in all the right places
peruse their menus
like passengers on a train,
their eyes on the scenery
ride innocently over
the rust-red tracks.

Glue-Girl

First glimpse of the child sent to replace me
Is of glassine bone and milky skull.
Two hearts quicken, ages in ages yawn.
Doctors chat and diddle buttons,
Knead the image squirming on their monitors –
A handful of centimeters from ulna to shoulder,
The gauge of the brain-pan,
The auspicious twelfth rib.
There the heart, like a tulip sprouting from the chest,
The kiss-blowing machine, the plunge
Of its pumping, the determined sucking
Already underway.
The astronaut, wound round its cord,
The slack-eyed hero, the virtueless saint
Is selfing itself into light.
I gasp, from fear.
Little glue-boy, little glue-girl,
What will you come to?
No peace, no peace.
Your home all storm, a tempest of blood,
And in all that ocean one swimmer is stroking,
Stroking and stroking,
Keen to the sound
Of thunder underwater.

Heartbreak

The Blind Glutton

The caterpillar had eaten all the leaves on the bough.
Oh!, cried the sparrow, you have killed the tree!
How am I supposed to know, the caterpillar cried,
can't you see I don't have eyes.

The Cigarette Butt

I have ambitious aspirations
the cigarette butt announced.
The toadstool said to him,
I don't think that's very practical

The Fountain

Families come from all over
and spread their blankets on the grass
The fountain is predictable
every forty minutes it goes off
and sprays like a carousel
of rinestones
Mommy look, a little boy says,
I tasted it, it's salty –
and kind of greasy.
Mother kleenexes a smudge
from his cheek,
Don't you know it's
a fountain of tears?

The Cast-Iron Skillets

God says, I need you to do something for me
and hands you two-red hot frying pans.

Twenty years later you run into him again.
He says, are you still holding those things?
Hey, you can set one of them down.

The Man With No Arms And No Legs

A man with no arms and no legs
is grinning ear to ear.
What have you got to be cheerful about
he is asked.
I like how the light is playing on my face
I have a feeling it's my lucky day

The Miracle

The man in bad straits had prayed for a miracle
and a jumbo jet landed on his house

The Man Made Out Of Glass Who Keeps Breaking

Every motion he makes
some new part breaks off
first a finger
then a hand
He wonders whose blood that is
forming on the edge
He keeps breaking and breaking
without losing mass
The spit bubbles
between his lips
Why doesn't someone say
stop stumbling about like a dope
All this pointless breathing
and acting surprised

He is an item of scientific interest
Making rainbows out of prisms
Don't love me he says
it's unsafe when I shatter

The Chord

See how lifting one finger
changes everything
A door opens, something
new and unidentified is there
Do you hear it?
Do you hear?

How? Why?

She could be so sweet and brave but yet so afraid,
wonderfully vulgar but not much of a divulger
alive with laughter and then thoughtful after
But when she went black there was no going back
Baby, how did you do this thing
And what was God thinking

2010

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And the midwife left,
And our friends finished off the champagne,
We wrapped it twitching in a white cloth
And set it between our bodies in the bed.
Sleeping rigid as steel bars,
Terrified we'd roll upon the being
And smother the life,
And dreamed of it sliding to its death
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Mystery

A scene familiar from late night,
the husband in the cellar,
struggling to rinse blood from cloth.
Now is the time for the washday miracle,
what did the paper say about removing blood,
hot water sets its rusty paws as evidence
and the world will know what was done.
See how the gelatin beads along the mesh,
the plasm of life splashed the length of it, dyed.
Taste – like coins in the pocket too long,
of things suspect, gone wrong,
of what should ever be in edging out.
Blood, blood, and the wretched Lady
wrung hands and wailed for the
perfumes of Arabia, and a gallant
man and the blade subsumed.
Blood, blood, and the last survivor
plunges the mass back into the cold.
The press said something snapped in him,
a stain that spread, a marinade of bed.
And the bodies lying in the room overhead
are still now, the seeping at low ebb,
and the red-eyed husband mounts the stairs
and stands beside the sleeping wife
and newborn child.

Since She Died

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unwrapping a napkin
when for no reason the people
stop sipping coffee,
become monster babies
from a monograph of freaks
cyclops baby, girl with no brain,
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well-issued and well-nourished
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peruse their menus
like passengers on a train,
their eyes on the scenery
ride innocently over
the rust-red tracks.

Clints and Grykes

Clints be the islands that float apart.

Grykes be the fathoms that must be paved.

Schist be the rock that guards your heart.

Karst be the stones that cap your grave.

Kraken Press
St. Paul