

THE GREAT BIG BOOK OF FINLEY

Collected Poems, More or Less
Mike Finley

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Airline Food

My greatest hit, published twice in Rolling Stone, 1977, The first time, beside a Linda Ronstadt album review. The second time -- the editor forgot he had already published it once -- under a smiling Dolly Parton.

The one as familiar as the other -an aluminum sleigh traversing piles of cloud,
and then the tinfoil peeled
from a steaming lunch. This cauliflower
seems familiar.

1977

Pandit

Pandit was my yoga meditation instructor in Minneapolis in 1974-1975. He was very earnest, very eager to make it in the U.S. I believe he is still at it.

The vocational counselor in Delhi apologized for giving bad advice:

"I know now not every young Brahmin with money is wise."

Many years later, Pandit's swami, glancing about his townhouse in St. Anthony Falls,

Shook his head. "Pandit-ji," he Said, "your instincts are bad enough,

but your lifestyle is one I cannot agree with."

His furnishings in the Danish cherrywood style,

his checks in the popular Scenic Wilderness design, the Rockies, Mojave,

Maine lighthouse and drive-thru Sequoia.

Pandit's crossing occurred one evening in the spring of 1973.

He had chanted a special Intention for two nights and a day,

and now his skin began to evanesce, and a glow like radium suffused his features

and the bones of his hands and feet shone in the ricepaper silhouette like moonlit twigs.

Suddenly Swami barges in, unplugs the lava-lamp and shakes Pandit by the shoulders.

"Wake up, Balbir, you disgrace to your caste. When will you cease all this fidgeting?"

Four years of doctrine and contemplation and Swami Mukhtaranda throws up his hands.

"Tell me, Pandit, have you considered a alternate career, such as Dentistry?

People get toothaches, you could ease their awful pain.

We have been Discussing your case at Himalayan Central in the Loop.

Pandit-ji, we've arrived at a decision -- it's just not working out."

Pandit breaks down on the other end.

"But what of my chapel, with the acoustic paneling and foam carpet pads --

What of the rent, my three skinny daughters, the Irish setter, the Triumph Roadster?

Give me one more chance, I promise business will boom."

Swami relents: "Just thank God you're in Minneapolis where you can't hurt anyone."

Pandit attends continuing education courses in business management

at the university convention center, learns the Seven Words to Seal a Sale,

prints meditation coupons in the back pages of the Sunday TV section.

Hatha enrollments begin to swell, and a course in breathing for data processors

draws overflow crowds, registered nurses from around the city

salute the sun from every angle, suburban gardeners no longer fret

about scaly-worm and red-ear mites.

Swami Writes: "I am man enough to admit I was wrong.

You have rounded into some kind of Pandit!

Christmas is out, we've been booked at Vail since Memorial Day."

Pandit spawns a yogi tummy, bolstered by his taste for Hostess Snowballs.

The wisdom of the East is born again, midwestern.

"Shift gears with your one min, retain the other for the clutch."

He hires so many assistant pandits, he doesn't know which one smokes Luckys

out by the gazebo between lectures on the holy wind within.

But Sunday mornings while the Christians pray, Pandit snaps on snorkel

and weighted boots, and drifts the tangled floor of Lake Calhoun.

"On surface," he tells his class on scuba yoga, "we encounter the brunt of life's agitations,

those waves and splashes that torment the honest heart.

But when we go below we feel this unlikeliest thing, the tranquil wet embrace of God."

He pads through the mud, brushes aside long ropes of alga.

I Am I, he inhales, Thou art Thou, he exhales,

and here in this constant kiss of life is the successful career

of one soldier of Shiva in these United States!

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."

My People

Sometimes I pause in mid-reading and gaze out at the people who came to hear me. You can see the profound experience in their eyes, the sorrow and the joy I have put in them. I know these people so well. Yes, they've been around the block, they've looked at life from both sides now. Just think if you could take everything they know and distill it into Essence of Amazing Knowledge, and preserve it in an alabaster vial, because the world so needs what they know. What I'm getting at, the median age has got to be about 60, and as I look at their ripe, beautiful faces, all lit up with gratitude, wonderment, mindfulness and generosity, I'm thinking: How many more books are these people likely to buy?

Bumper Stickers

I break for green lights.

My gun is my friend - my ONLY friend.

My 6th grader is nothing special.

I 🎔 my dog, who would lay down his life for me.

Honk if you're white.

COEXIST ... because I know where you live.

I'm stupid - and I *vote*.

Dust

Every night I sit on the edge of the bed and brush the day's dust from the soles of my feet. I can't see the tiny stuff that's there, but I'm guessing it includes garden mud, house dust, bug parts, cracker crumbs, dog hair, spider web, flakes of skin, dandruff and whatever else is down there.

The graceful hand grooms the brutish foot.

This is the moment my life is like the life of everyone else,

of every walk of life, this universal act of hygiene.

Either that or I need to vacuum more often.

Hertz Doughnut

Foolish woman, imagining we will become friends! You snort and smile and cover your face.

You all think we are such nice guys when we are aching to pump you full of tears.

Girls underestimate the fusion at hand.

They suppose they are in charge and that they dance because it's their idea, but it isn't.

1988

The Moment You Learn Life Will Keep Breaking Your Heart; 1958

I let the grass get too long
so I couldn't see what lay inside the weeds,
and the machine ran over
a nest of coneys.
I carried the babes to the garage,
daubing their wounds with a washcloth
and watering them with an eye dropper.
In two days they were all gone,
all seven, so sweet, so pure.
I sat on the porch by the Chinese elm,
the one my dad said goodbye to me under,
and I sobbed.

The Devil And Waldo Jeffers

For Wayne Nelsen

There was a man who had one wish in life,

'to be able to suck his own dick.

He saw a picture in a book about Kundalini.

It would solve so many problems, he thought.

He prayed to Jesus, I will live a life of virtue and probity

If you just grant me this one request.

Jesus was characteristically silent, but one night

A stranger in a flowing cape stood in Waldo's bedroom.

"Have you tried spine softening pills?" the stranger asked

And offered him a tin with two pills in it.

"One pill will last your entire life," he explained.

"Then why are you offering two?"

"In case you lose one," the stranger shrugged.

That night Waldo took the first pill and stayed up past midnight

Waiting for it to take effect. When nothing happened, He took the other pill and swallowed it.

"I mean, why not, really," he reasoned.

In the morning he awoke to find his spinal column softened

From medulla to coccyx.

"Hot dog," he said, grabbing the sheets to pull himself downward.

But when he got to his midsection, he made a terrible discovery –

His dick was as soft as his spine, beyond all remedy.

"Aw shit," said Waldo, "isn't this just the way these things always go?"

So Waldo had no alternative for the rest of his life Except doing the next best thing, make art.

In the Checkout Line at Rainbow

I see you scanning my frozen entrees

And I understand that you are dying.

Not that you will die today but it's coming, give it time.

Your heads have pointed so many bar codes face down,

And so when you ring up the bill and I insert my Visa,

The kind with the embedded chip,

I look up at you and our eyes meet for just a second longer

than they are supposed to meet, and there you are,

And you say Thank you, have a great day.

And I am saying, I see you.

I see that you are dying and I love you that way,

For passing all my items over the scanner,

Each one with the care it deserves.

Because I am dying too, we're all of us dying,

Look how hard we are trying to be here for one another,

Each day going through these blessed motions --

Because we all still have to eat, isn't that right?

2016

Angel Still Guarding The Gate

It's a used car lot now

on the outskirts of Karbala.

Mostly American cars, some Nissans --

That's a '97 Land Rover over by the concrete wall.

I have been standing in one place

for 6,000 years without relief --

no one gets that this

is Paradise.

2010

Found Poem: Millions Demand America's Purest Silver Dollar

Ad by New York Mint, 2013

These legal tender U.S. silver dollars feature a nearly 100-year-old design

of Lady Liberty striding confidently forward while draped in a U.S. flag,

while the other side depicts a majestic U.S. eagle, thirteen stars, and an American shield.

But the clock is ticking. Timing is everything. Our advice to you – keep this to yourself.

Tear out this page if you have to, because the more people know about this offer, the worse it is for you.

Supplies are limited and there is a strict limit of 40 per household.

This is a coin flip you can't afford to lose!



Bernal Diaz At Prayer Before The Massacre, Cholula, 1519

We sleep in armor again tonight, like tipped over beetles.

We roll, we roll, and the roaches rattle through our limbs

And joints and iron breastplates.

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

To the true God your select ones pray

To discern the difference between

What is rust, what blood.

When the hour to clamber upward comes,

Grant safe passage to some safe place

To look down upon what is ours

Grand Canyon

If we pulled the plug on the ocean and the water drained away,

what canyon would we live in then and what descent should we make?

We would wait until it hardened lest we all got stuck in the mud.

We would pack for a good long journey, then make our way downward.

2006

Star Trek Episode 80 Synopsis

The Enterprise is drawn to a galaxy emitting immense waves of cosmic pain. The Federation says it looks really weird, and would Kirk and his people look into it.

Entering the strobing galaxy, they alight on a single dark planet, covered with bare ground.

Sensors detect a living heartbeat coming from a dwelling on a vast featureless continent. In the basement, they find a shivering boy of the Romulan race, wrapped in a dirty blanket. The boy's body is a map of horrible wounds -- lacerations, burns, and impalements.

And yet the boy is alive and, against all logic, healthy. The doctor determines that they boy had been put to death by torture on the planet Romulus. Then mysteriously, the executed boy had been brought back from the dead, and moved in a wink to this solar system to heal. He had sat in the house, sobbing, for three thousand two hundred and eighteen years.

"This is what he does, Jim," Spock says. "He visits planet after planet, saves the inhabitants by dying a hideous

death, and then is transported here to mend for the next planet."

"And Jim," Bones mutters, with no lack of judgment. "It's not even his idea. It's his *old man's*."

"Something very similar happened on my own planet of Vulcan, over forty centuries ago," Spock notes. "We commemorate him as the noble Vulcan Epigil."

"Mine as well," says the Klingon second mate Urkuruk -"His name was Bartakran the Bloodied."

"And on Earth, we have the story of Jesus," Kirk says, frowning. "But what was the purpose of these deaths? Did they make any difference in the behavior of your races?"

The Klingon shrugs. "A little, maybe. We could have been more warlike, I suppose."

Kirk interrogates the abused boy. "What would you like us to do? Could we find a safe place for you away from your father? Could we negotiate with him on your behalf?"

The boy shivers in his blanket. "I must keep doing what I'm doing," he says, with a resigned voice. "Because there's no talking to dad."

2002

~The soul gets caught up

The soul returns to you entangled in bad ideas.

It has been rummaging in the hedges again.

There are no shortcuts for this deprogramming.

Each burr of thought must be excised individually.

You berate it with the wisdom you have obtained.

This curiosity is not your friend.

The mind does not know what it knows.

But souls do not compromise.

It is all or nothing with the likes of them.

The scent of information draws them on.

The foolish heart has no recourse except follow.

The Stink

Does not get that it is the problem: "Brothers, sisters -- where are you going?"

~It laid down its life

You wonder if it's true, the thing people say, that this selfish creature dozing on its throne would lay its life down for you.

Conjure scenarios -- the attacker on the street, the bullet racing toward your heart, and your soul leaping into the gap to accept it. The music swells and out come the hankies.

But the truth is more homely than that.

The soul laid down its life for you the moment that you met.

2007

My Disease

I took my disease out to dinner,
And later, we walked by the bridge.
I told her what was in my heart
And invited her in.

Room Under the Rock

Seeking refuge from the world I lifted a slab of sidewalk that had been shunted aside.

Immediately I became aware of a community of beings who had just had their sky

ripped away from them, and now the sun screamed at them, and something like Polyphemus

held their world in his paws. Oh! Oh! They sought to shelter their eyes with two hands,

four hands, some of them many more hands. I got to know them all in time.

A doodlebug who could roll into and out of a ball again. Several red millipedes

zipping this way and that. A lascivious nightcrawler, coiling and uncoiling its wet body.

An earwig caught in the camera's click, a mugshot of fear. A spider nest like a cotton ball,

twirled open by the stone. And everywhere eggs of some kind of creature,

scattered in the pockmarked mud. A slender earthworm, too delicate to touch,

packed its casings in the dirt. Sweet new friends of the dark and damp, I said,

How tired I am of the ways of the world! So they invited me in, and I crouched

alongside them -- and the rock slid comfortably back into place.

2011

Envoi

Why should I cry that I'm not getting rich

When I had fun at every step?

Why should I charge you for one of my books

When I had nothing to do with it?

I didn't do anything; nobody does.

It was given to me, so here, I'm giving it to you.

Eleven-Year-Old Boys Discussing Death

Four on the front porch, tossing a ball back and forth.

"I don't want to get sucked into quicksand," says one.

"Get hit by a truck," the little one says. "Boom, you're gone."

All agreed that cancer's the worst. "It takes forever, and you might get your feet sawed off, and the whole while you know you're a goner."

"Maybe a disease that gets you in a week, but doesn't hurt that much," says the third. "You get to say goodbye to people, and then your vision gets blurry and that's it."

"Or you're watching TV and someone changes the channel."

Soon they're tossing in the yard again.

"Hey quicksand," says sawed-off feet, "go long."

2010

Poor Lanny

When Lanny heard his dad was dying in Ohio, he packed his duffle and strapped it to his cycle.

On the way to the airport he got blindsided by a Chevy Nova, and he veered off the highway on his Kawasaki into a ditch, which he bounced out of and smacked into a tree, where he hung from a low branch for a minute before falling back to the ground.

The Chevy never stopped; he learned later it was a family of undocumenteds, and they didn't have insurance and there really wasn't much point in hanging around to identify a body they didn't know and couldn't afford to help.

An ambulance came. Turns out Lanny was hurt pretty bad, breaking both arms and legs in a couple of places each, and fracturing his skull on top of that.

They put him in a body cast and he stayed in the hospital for three weeks until he could move one arm again.

They sent him home in a kind of pulleyed contraption that allowed him to walk, but only like a drunken spider.

He couldn't bathe or cook. He couldn't lie down. He watched TV all day long, until the batteries on the remote went dead. In two months he never heard from anyone so he was restless and decided to go for a walk.

He hobbled down the back stairs and made his way to the street and into a nearby billiard parlor. He angled himself in the door and ordered a beer, and asked a woman on the next stool over to tip the glass and help him drink it.

The woman watched as he drank the entire pint, one thirsty gulp at a time. Then Lanny staggered over to the cue rack and tried to take a shot at the cue ball, tripping over his plaster and aluminum crutches.

The woman stepped forward and set down her hand, to settle the cue. Lanny shot the 8-ball into the corner pocket. He and the woman looked at each other a long time. Later he learned she was an heiress to a broadcasting fortune and was looking that night for something just as pathetic as him, and so she took him home.

Six weeks later Lanny shows up at his dad's funeral in Ohio. Down to a pair of aluminum braces now, he made his way, halting, down the center aisle of the funeral home to see the old man laid out.

Before he can get there his mother steps in front of him. She beholds her broken son, who had moved heaven and earth to be at his father's funeral, but was still late.

She put her hands on her hips and says: "Lanny, how could you?"

1992

Flint

I was born in Flint, Michigan, in 1950 in the center of the century of terror, at the equator of darkest Michigan, in a crummy duplex on Knickerbocker Street

out on the edge of town. Flint is also the birthplace also of General Motors,

and of cars you have heard of and cars you have not heard of --

the Dort, the Mason, the Little, and the Flint itself.

In the 1980s Michael Moore made the city look ridiculous in its wretchedness,

tumbling from one financial crisis to another, endlessly downward like a suicide

through a series of awnings, finally crashing through a convertible roof,

the city plummeted like a Slant 6 engine from the top of the Durant Hotel,

falling six stories, digging a hole in the earth, to return to the vein of iron it sprang from,

buried among the bodies of the Obibwe and the coffins of the Methodist pioneers.

At six months of age they bundled me up and drove off to Cleveland,

which was not so bad as Flint, then, yet, and my dad made Cadillacs there

and drank and railed against my mother's family, including my grandmother Lula,

who died when I was six. She lived on a farm in Genesee County, she was sturdy

and good-hearted, but she must have challenged my dad about something,

he would roll his eyes at the mention of her. One summer we visited the farm

and I watched my grandmother behead a chicken running in the yard,

she chased it with an ax, and I watched that chicken dance in the dust,

blood spurting from where its head had been. My grandparents had no running water

but the water they did have, pulled from a well, was clean and pure –

that was the water she washed the chicken in. And she reached into the chicken's body

and pulled out a pearl – an egg, the shell still soft, like skin – and rolled it in her palm.

My father thought anyone who did a kind deed was a sucker --

no one ever accused him of that – I'm sure she must have told him

the truth about himself. He called her retarded, but she called him on his game.

Sixty years later my son and I drive through the city, and the streets of Flint

are flooding, the sudden rains are choking the gutters and kids are out splashing

in their sneakers in the lake that used to be Knickerbocker Street,

out on the outskirts of Flint where the grass grows high as cane on every lawn

and burned-out cars stand along the curbs and the lightning flashes

through the hole in the roof of the house I was born in, where the shutters slap and the curtain drips into the sea that swirls

and sucks things down, clean water rushing headlong into the storm sewers of Flint.

2011

Parade Of Homes

What if we had lived a different life,

What if the houses we lived in were different houses,

What if we awoke each morning in different rooms,

What if we looked out the windows on a different world?

Would we have made different friends,

And stayed up late on summer nights, laughing and drinking with them?

Would different moments have defined our fate,

Chance occurrences on other street corners?

Would we have grown into different people?

Would we have experienced different success?

Would we have different philosophies now?

Would they have brought us closer together or pulled us farther apart?

When I bicycle down these neighborhood streets,
The ones we toured and considered for ourselves,
The rooms we examined, carefully nodding our heads,
the wood that we smelled, the glass that shone -I remember those smells, I remember that light
And I think about the life we did have, and I wonder.

2012

17 Years In The Life Of Cicada

Ordinarily the air stands still and the leaves stand still and the birds and the clouds bide their time in the trees.

It lasts, you get used to it, you have been squeezed and let go

by your breath a billion times by now, still the song plays on

on the fork in your head. Everyone wants to die and go to heaven

though not necessarily in that order. Who can blame

Each time you forget you're getting older is a bigger mistake.

Do you really suppose you're the same dumb saint they left in the desert

who shrunk to a peapod with two praying hands?

Who was it that came and pried you apart? Do you still preach

that stuck in the heart lives a bug who wakes in the ordained year and sings?

That voice is the music that bids time pass, soft and threatening

like an instant of ripeness hung on its stem, like the purplest plum.

Mention that name and you burst into blossom.

You will be round like the moon you pinch between two fingers.

1974

My Dog Lucy Eating 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

Joseph and Jehovah

Both were distant fathers, in their ways.

Joseph was of the opinion it was none of his business,

This deal he was never a party to.

He loved the boy, and taught him what he knew.

But they never had The Conversation

And he died in the silence he lived in.

Jehovah was more complicated.

He explained he was sending the boy on a mission,

And it would challenging but glorious in the end.

But after he left, there were no letters and no calls.

And at the critical moment, when the son called out

To save him, he folded his newspaper and stared into space.

2016

A Very Bright Day on Hammonasset Beach

The gulls fly overhead, piercing with their alien cries.

The waves crash and foam upon the sand.

Redheads on their beach towels are bursting into flame.

1979

Sexual Reassignment

My wife returned from a long trip away.

We went for a walk with the dogs.

"I notice you have a little whisker on your chin," I joked.

"Are you turning into a man?"

She looked tenderly at me, like it was a question

She'd been dying to answer, and asked,

"Yes, I am. What do you think of the idea?"

"I don't know what I think about it," I said.

"This is all so new to me, Jenny."

"Gene," she corrected me gently. I mean, he corrected me.

"So are we going to still be married and stuff?"

"What do you want?" he said.

"Whatever," I said to him, in the dream.

2016

Last Minneapolis Bear

We can call her Sally but she doesn't have a name.

She was born near Savage but has lived in the city for twenty six years.

She walks at night and is never sighted by day.

The only people who see her scouring the alleys are drunks and the homeless and couples under streetlights.

The cops don't know, they stuff themselves with sandwiches in their squad cars,

They never see shadows slouching through the dark.

When you hear a cat screech, or a dog sound out from behind a fence,

She is there, bounding down the boulevards.

She walks on grass to avoid leaving footprints.

She knows to let the dumpster lids down softly.

She checks screen doors to find ones that are unlocked.

Lit in floodlights, she snatches northerns from the spillway at St. Anthony.

She drags a burlap bag of oatmeal across the Stone Arch Bridge.

She pads through the jungle along the Mississippi,

And swims across the narrows under the Interstate in the dark.

She checks the truck dock at Cub Foods for the day's old vegetables.

Huffing and galumphing she makes her way to the mushroom caves

That were worship centers years before, before the railroad companies blew them up.

But they left one corridor intact -- inside the cave the bear spreads out

her takings for the two young cubs.

We can call her Sally, but Sally's not her name.

by Mike and Daniele Finley, 1993

Plebiscite of the Grass

The grass demanded that a vote be held.

"I think we have all been buffaloed," said one blade.

"All this talk of terror!

Our leaders have deceived us into being fearful of this enemy!

Who among us has witnessed a single act of terror?"

The rest of the grass tried to remember,

but memory has never been a strength of grass.

And the leadership made no effort to defend itself.

They could not remember either.

"If we throw off the shackles of fear," said the blade,
"we will have a mandate to grow, to seed,
to be all that we can be -- are you with me?"

The grass cheered and stood straight and tall, proud to be grass on a day filled with sunshine. No one noticed the distant sound of a motor being cranked.

2016

Paraphrase

Once upon a time ... you sure were well-dressed,

And you liked throwing the bums a dime back then in your prime, didn't you?

People would say, "Look out doll, the way you're going you're heading for a fall."

But you figured everyone was just teasing you.

You used to laugh back then at all the people that were hanging out.

Now you don't talk so loud, huh?

You don't seem so proud now, somehow, at least not in my opinion –

Scrounging change for your lunch money.

How does it feel? That's right, I'm asking you how it feels,

To not have a home, to not be known by anybody -

Down the road, end-over-end, like some kind of Indiana Jones downhill-rolling stone?

We understand you went to one of the better schools, Miss Lonely

But all you ever did there was get juiced in it.

Nobody explained to you how to live out by the curb

And now look at you, you seem to have gotten pretty used to it.

You said you'd never compromise with that Mysterious Tramp, but hey –

You' re starting to realize – that that Tramp's not selling alibis

And you gaze into the vacuum of his eyes

And you clatter to your knees and you beg like a doll,

Hey Please Mister Tramp, please let's us make a deal!

How does that feel? Close your eyes and explain to everyone how it feels to be you,

To be all by yourself, to be all solitary like, with no idea how to get home

Completely unknown, pared down to the bone,

Rolling alone like a rolling stone?

You never cast your eyes circularly to see the frowns on the faces of the jugglers and the clowns

When they all arrived and started performing tricks for you with cards.

You never understood how substandard it all was

Delegating other people to go get your kicks for you.

You used to ride a chrome horse with your diplomat

And on his shoulder sat a cat from somewhere in Thailand

Now isn't it dismaying to discover that your envoy was the wrong boy all along

After he pilfered every single thing from you that he could.

How does it feel? Please, honey babe, please tell me how it feels –

To be all alone the way like you are now, with no way ever to find your way home

As if you are completely not known

As if you were a rolling stone

Noble women shinny up the steeple and lookie -- there are all the pretty people

And they're all drinking and thinking that they got it made

You're exchanging all your precious gifts.

But you should give strong consideration to holding onto that diamond ring

Because it's very possible you'll have to pawn it babe.

You used to be so amused at the Napoleon in rags and the language that he used

Seek him out now, he's calling you, you shouldn't refuse

When you don't have anything, you don't have anything to lose

You're an invisible guy, with no secrets to disguise.

How does that feel, fella?

I really want to know how it feels to be you now –

To be utterly on your own

Without a GPS home.

You're like some unfortunate person who can never be known,

You bear such a strong resemblance to a rolling stone.

A kind of a dead ringer for a rolling stone.

A doppelganger for a rolling stone.

Separated at birth, mixed up in the maternity ward, like a pair of rolling stones.

1991

Game

some say the world
will end in stone,
others paper,
and still some blade
because fear makes hash
of every laugh
and laughter drives love
to distraction
but love's cover
can smother fear
rock scissors paper
fear laughter love

The Day

You wake up seeing mountains where there were no mountains.

People on the street have somewhere to get to,

but still they crane their heads and say hello.

In every tree and bush you hear cheeping, and an assortment of dogs

are hollering from their pens.

You go to the door where someone should have been standing

and you rap on the wood with light knuckles.

You shield your eyes from the sun with one hand.

A hawk nuzzles itself on a bare phone line.

A child in blue runs by with a kite.

2015

Prayer in Defiance of Grief

How can you kill what cannot be killed?
Why weep for those who have been taken?
Why furnish ammunition to the enemy
Who hammers jewels from your tears?
Who am I to say, 'This is the end!'
When I am the world's worst ignoramus.
I can't outsmart the equity markets
But I second-guess my molecules?
I have made a list of every known sadness
And set it ablaze on a paper plate.
Let others twist their hankies at night.
I am free of all that forever.

Prayer for the Reordering of History

If we went just by what the papers say, The world'd be burned to a crisp by now. So where did all the beauty come from? And what's with the pitchfork hanging in the air? It's so easy for us to get sidetracked Over massacres, bombs and pogroms. Did you order all that blood for yourself Or did our own certainty require it? The clang of armies was our idea. All you ever offered was love. And now it is our charming defiance That throws that in your face. Help us to identify and ignore All propaganda. Better to be blind as a mole than to see Disingenuously.

Bigly

At first the word seemed appalling, seemed to suggest

The something went wrong in his language center,

Which would explain a whole lot, his peculiarities

And his stubborn refusal to say things right.

But then the word grew on us -

What was so bad about turning an adjective into an adverb?

All you need to do is add the suffix -

Sillily, daylily, littlely -

And you have a fun word you have made your own.

And it sends a valuable message every time you say it -

I make the rules, I run the language, I will keep saying this

Until you start saying it too,

because I am the king of all these things.

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.

Passing Through Nobles County on a Clear Day

It was not a tornado because it was not attached to cloud.

It was a dust devil, a creature of air pressure,

a swirl of turbulence zagging through beanfields on a warm afternoon,

not giant and forboding, but tawny and tan,

the color of dirt being milled into sunlight,

like a thousand-foot feather tickling the belly of the earth.

1979

Biker Bob Canizzaro's Living Room Decor, 1977

Ignore the Iron Crosses and posters of Nuremburg
And leather-breasted blondes on naked Harleys.

But drink in the tapestry tacked up behind the empties.

It might be a tribute to baked potatoes clad in aluminum foil

But it isn't, it's night-time on an arid beach,

And the two astronaut buddies walk hand in hand

In the white light from earth --

Brushed on black velvet, hung next to the platter of Bobby and JFK.

1977

The Angels of Gomorrah

We invited the angels to come down and live among us, imagining they would class the town up.

How amazing they were to gaze upon,

white as doves in their brilliant raiment.

They played these banjo-like instruments and drank tons of tea and played pinochle.

We had no way of knowing they were not housetrained, and they go anywhere they want, and these angels went quite a bit.

Their stomachs were celestial in nature and unused to garbanzo beans.

The upshot was that we could no longer dry our laundry in the yard

without the angels dropping angel-bombs from the trees.

So we were forced to ask them to leave, as nicely as we could.

There were hard feelings and it did not end well, no, it did not end well at all.

You do not think disgusting when you think about angels,

but you probably should.

2015

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!

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

1991

Let's Put Out The Sun

It had been aggravating us for quite some time.

The world had got warmer and stickier,

deserts swarmed over the land,

and there was just a sense,

shared by people in every nation,

that we all had had quite enough of this tyranny.

But how does a tiny planet extinguish a flaming object that

is 1.3 million times larger than it?

Our entire nuclear stockpile would be like a pimple to the giant.

Maybe some ray gun exists that no one bothered to mention, maybe that could be put to use.

Finally we decided just to ignore it,

to turn our backs on its constant fusion.

All this time, it was fueled by our conversation.

Nice day, wouldn't you say?

It was surprising how the people of the earth accepted this challenge,

and gratifying as the sun began to darken and shrink.

It just showed what we can do when we work together.

In Passing

We are always passing people on sidewalks and in hallways.

They walk toward you, you walk toward them,

It is unlikely either one of you will say anything.

Maybe some non-hostile tic – a smirk from him,

A momentary smile from a woman scared to death.

There is a rule against waving happily when they are still a block away,

And everyone observes that rule except the insane.

There is a chunk of you lodged deep in the hypothalamus

that understands that passing is a moment of possible danger

that this oncoming stranger may thrust the point of a bread knife

into the soft part of your forehead and the last dumb thing you said

was hello

2015

Everything Dies But Nothing Goes Away

In Kotzebue, Alaska, there is no recycling program.

No one wants what this small city far away to the north throws away.

It's too expensive to go after their shit for the small savings of reprocessing it.

A crusher would cost a million plus and everything would still

have to be sorted and separated.

You think of the melting glaciers and you think of the energy

that goes into everything that is visible everywhere.

And it's not just the pop cans, it's everything.

And so the front yards fill up, with everything people have used --

the cars that no longer run, the freezers that stopped freezing,

the broken toilets, the ravaged boats, old air conditioners, rusted grills,

the splintered plywood ramps used by skateboarders to get lift from the pull of the tundra.

Bicycles, snow-gos, barrows, storage containers, chainsawed doghouses,

shipping containers as big as a house, cement mixers that ground to a halt.

I saw industrial equipment I could not identify,

great hulking iron things with fans and flanges and levers

that once did something powerful but now can only sit in front of a log cabin.

I saw a broken treadmill labeled "Endurance."

I saw four school lockers, leaning side by side against a wall,

their yellow paint flaking in the subzero cold.

And up on the tar-paper roofs of these caved-in houses,

the racks of moose and caribou, skulls still connected,

vegetarian teeth bared to the cold, the trophies of longago hunts.

And sits on their lawns forever, I don't mean lawns, because there is no grass,

it sits on their property, it is a forest of rusting junk,

it gives away their secrets, it's a 3D photo album, shot to scale,

it's the story of their lives standing around doing nothing.

No one wants pays the gas to have it sent to a landfill, put on a barge to be chopped up and reused

A part of me says how wasteful. A part of me says what a mess.

But it teaches us a lesson, that everything we make takes up space.

We who ship everything off to the dump have convinced ourselves

we are tidy people when somewhere a half dozen zip codes away

a landfill is groaning from our excesses.

And we look at these people of the north and wring our noses

like they are the slobs and we are the civilized ones while our shit is packed off to trouble some people in China, in Mexico, or under some mountain in Nevada, or it leeches into our own water substrate and we wonder why our SAT scores are dropping. It's a filthy-ass world however you shave it so why not keep the bones above ground, to see? And that's what they do, in Kotzebue — the permafrost prevents deep graves, as if the earth is saying. oh no you don't, you can't hide that slop in me,

so you lay them atop of it instead, you heap stones and gravel over

the suck-mouth ancestors and the beautiful girls in beaded fur parkas,

you strew plastic flowers on the sea-washed stones, flowers that fade from the cold and the blinding sun, and say this was our life, we cannot tell a lie, and even if we could, the earth would not allow it.

2010

Minnesota State Fair

I wait outside the Port a Potty for the 7-year-old boy inside to finish, and when I go in, there is boy pee everywhere.

It is like the first few moments following the monsoon.

It is a 360 degree bombardment, nothing was spared.

I used to be a boy, I know they have a powerful stream but even standing up they are so close to the seat, you would think they could aim for a better result.

Or maybe this is intentional, a kind of declaration.

Powerless in the greater world, they let loose their stream behind the pulled latch, grim determination on their pusses.

I daub the area with toilet paper and gingerly lower myself onto the damp, like a sad clown making way for the next act.

2008

The Penguins Of Rio, 2011

(AP) - Thousands of penguins, refugees from the melting Antarctican ice shelves,

are washing up on Rio de Janeiro's bacterial beaches.

In recent months more than 4,000 penguins have waddled in at Copacabana, Ipanema, Barra da Tijuca, Joatinga and Leblon.

Citizens, wishing to be helpful, take the creatures to their homes

and place them in their freezers, imagining penguins require cold --

which they do, but they also require air.

The result has been hundreds of frozen, asphyxiated penguins,

tasting more like seafood than fowl.

Tiago Muniz, a veterinarian at the Niteroi Zoo, believes overfishing

has forced the penguins to swim further from shore to find fish to eat.

"That leaves them more vulnerable to getting caught up in the strong ocean currents."

But witnesses report seeing vast flotillas of penguins paddling north

past Tierra del Fuego toward Buenos Aires and Montevideo.

And now they are washing up on the shores of Brazil

like messengers from God saying, change is coming.

2011

The Idea of a Boat

Whoever came up with the idea of a boat was rowing against intuition.

The water, which seeks to envelope us and fill our lungs with itself and drag us down to its embrace, could be contradicted with a thin membrane, a leaf, a log, a raft, a door and we bound out on the breast of death like anybody's business.

2011

A Compact

I could have called it 'A Hallucination'

What came down came down on golden rungs, strapped to the air with golden thongs.

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

What goes goes to the end of my heart, the place I keep swept and warm for you that will always be yours.

Let me apologize for all the apologies.

What missed the mark, I confess to everything.

Who knows who knows the root and anxious word, the fluttering feet and the severed chord — whatever rises, does.

1976

Warning

Be wary of poems that mount the pedestal Brandishing words, or better still stand guard, prick up your ears. A deeper peace will take a thousand years.

Freeport

I discovered Lou Reed's home town was Freeport, Long Island.

It started life as an oysterman's town, carved out of the Great South Woods,

And later a retreat for theatrical people from the city, including Will Rogers, Sophie Tucker,, Buster Keaton, W.C. Fields, and Fannie Brice.

Because it is the back door to Brooklyn, many future luminaries grew up there –

Branch Rickey, Guy Lombardo, Broderick Crawford, Flavor Flav

(real name Rico Drayton), and Leo Carillo, tyhe guy who played Poncho on The Cisco Kid.

In the 20s it was a Klan town, holding huge rallies there, mainly against the Catholics and Jews, drawing 30,000 spectators

to watch the robed Klansmen parade. I thought of Lou Reed,

on the riding lawn mower as a boy, in this backwater of stars, and later on,

when he took refuge there from his early failures.

I thought of him sitting on the porch flipping Pall Mall butts into the viburnum,

His mom Toby frowning from the kitchen cubby window.

And I thought of him standing on the waterfront at Cow Meadow Park, overlooking the Narrows,

And imagining a greater Atlantic bearing down on the place, an ocean of knowing,

Here come the waves down by the sea, he sang, washing the eyes of the men who have died down by the sea –

It appeared on his first album, the one no one likes, but it's very beautiful, it is the opposite of heroin,

it is about the immensity of quiet, it is about our helplessness in the face of certain things.

Thanks, Dad, putting me through ECT to cure me being gay, that really paid off.

Is the song pretentious, a bit? Not when you consider the backup band was Yes.

It is a song of sad joy, standing at the ocean, intoxicating, drugging with its heavy nature.

Here come the waves. Here come the waves. Here come the waves,

And who would be borne on the shoulders of ocean, a thousand feet high at the height,

To be set down lame on the ragged lawns of Freeport, Long Island?

Cafe Extempore

The young poet decided to recite his work.

He had imbued it with properties of might.

Serpentine language, astonishing paradox,
fervent proclamations of his own arrival on the scene.

It would be ecstatic, ripped out of its time,
naked and heaving in the bright light onstage.

There he stood, before an audience of twelve people,
each one clutching pages of their own,
each one of whom had spent the week
the same way he did, filled with glory,
and he was about to learn a lesson about himself
in front of the last people on earth he wanted to know
this -pretenders, sad nobodies and goofy excuses -and he shook at the podium like foil.

1981

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. This frenzy cannot be maintained, of course, physics is against it, something always happens, there are so many limitations on what can be done, the possible is not possible, and that's the plain truth—though we love them the way a mother loves a child, religiously, improbably, and quaking with pride,

2016

Third Happiest Moment

a little bit dying but flamingly alive.

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 enveloping the ball as casual as all get-out.

But my heart sped up and I would quickly time travel to

thirty seconds later, the kids slapping me on the back with

their gloves and loving me. And all I had to do was catch a

ball.

It 's the 6th inning now, the final inning for our league. I am in left field, swatting my wonderful worn-in Billy Pierce

glove.

Some kid hits a high fly. It is the kind that goes up, up, up and it then down, down, down – right where you are 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. I time machine to thirty seconds from now, but 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, 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.

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 speak.

Gradually people turn to other topics. They are drifting from the moment.

On the ride home, I 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.

So I keep 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.

The Poodle Who Wished to be a German Shepherd

There was a Standard Poodle who wished to be a German Shepherd.

Everyone admires that I am chic, he said, but no one respects my ferocity.

So the Poodle fashioned styrofoam inserts and placed them inside his floppy ears, causing them to stand up straight.

Then the Poodle walked through the neighborhood with his ears standing up and his eyes almost closed with satisfaction.

But an American Bulldog, with a spiked collar, taking offense at the strange new dog, tackled him and bit him on the haunch. The Poodle, having a soft palate, could mount no defense, and slumped away to lick his wounds.

Oh, said the Poodle, if only I had appreciated my own best qualities, instead of trying to be something I am not!

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

The Tissue

Before she died, my mother lived with us for a year.

She was sick from diabetes.

Her feet were black and had no feeling, and there was little she still enjoyed in life. But one day I caught her in the kitchen.

She had dropped a wadded-up tissue on the floor and was struggling to bend over and pick it up.

Finally she scooted a chair beside it, stooped, and nabbed the bit of fluff.

It all took about three minutes.

Nothing worked for her any more, but she was damned if she would leave a Kleenex where everyone could see it.

2002

The Life of Broken Glass

Bits of clear and amber glass and metal collar in the street say something jarring happened here.

If you live in the city long enough you see the life of broken glass,

beginning as a puddle on an empty space where a pipe caved in a driver's window or a bottle heaved on a rocky night.

And each car driving over the puddle spreads it apart like crackling dough until only a few bright nuggets catch the glint of streetlamp light.

In an empty parking lot on Sunday morning you can see where the latest window was smashed, and here, and there, the fading remains of those broken earlier,

like crystal snow on unmarked graves.

And when you pull up to an intersection after the players in an accident have headed for the wings, you see the glass and think of the jolt that lingers in the air, black tires grumble forward, holding their breath.

The New Yorker

The breath of the woman crouched in a blanket in the gray slush flutes about her like a dying fire. She is wet and cold and has no place to go, and it is only early December.

Citizens stride by her, and their faces pronounce their opinions.

Young professionals look everywhere but at her.

The state of the city is going to hell.

Even the red hot vendor steers around her filthy yellow mittens,

He is doing brisk business in the snow.

You want to stand the woman up, slap the sleet from her hair and send her on some invisible errand, put her to work on a phone bank or streetcorner, passing out coupons for gyros sandwiches, earning a few dollars, anything but this public suffering, so deadly and so close to Christmas.

But God has made her incompetent and us indifferent, except for one woman, in a camel hair hat, who passes, stops, fiddles with her pocketbook, tiptoes back and places a five in the paper cup.

2000

The Reading of Jack Kerouac's Will

Surprise surprise, the bum on the road is worth \$20 million.

Him with 91 bucks in his checking account at the hour of death

So far at the end he couldn't find a paperback publisher for his final book.

Unsure what value to put on his estate, the probate court put it at a single dollar.

But now the heirs are wrangling over the estate, who gets the royalties, who owns the rights to manuscripts,

diaries, and all those thousands of letters.

One will after another is tossed out by the court.

Family members sneak off to sell stuff of his they stole.

A Remington typewriter. An edition of Goethe.

Some cufflinks given him at graduation.

Johnny Depp paid \$15,000 for a tattered trenchcoat.

The owner of the Indianapolis Colts bid \$2.3 million for the original teletype roll he wrote On The Road on.

Give it up, family, who never even knew the man.

He doesn't belong to the atoms and elements.

He doesn't belong to the oceans and mountains.

He doesn't belong to a nation or language and he certainly doesn't belong to you.

"For I will write in my will," he vowed while alive, "Quote,

I regret I was not able to love money more."

NOBODY owns Jack Kerouac.

2010

God Drives a Caterpillar D11

He seems very purposeful, and fulfilled ...

He needed this for so long ...
It's what he uses to get around now ...
It isn't very fast ...
The mileage is pathetic ...
But then he has all the gas in the world ...
He sits high in the seat ...
bouncing with every lurch ...
blue fumes pouring out around him ...
as he leans into the dirt ...

He wears a hard hat, safety glasses and his trademark corncob pipe, which he clenches with his smile, and you realize, God has really great teeth ... and a rag to wipe his face and forehead ... Everywhere the tread digs in ... it stutters in the clay ... but of course the earth surrenders to him, what choice does it have ... and a wall of wet mud forms at the nudging of his blade ...

2010

Two Single Mothers At the Anchorage Airport

One tows three daughters, holding hands in a line, to the counter.

All four are beautiful, but the oldest,

perhaps 13, is different.

She walks flatfooted, open-mouthed, pulling at her mom.

But when she reaches the check-in, she cocks her head and moans.

The mother shows zero embarrassment, she does not hiss harsh words.

She holds her daughter back, with dignity and love.

• **

The other mother might weigh 85 pounds, and her son, 12, glances at the other passengers with a hostile scowl.

There is no mercy in his eyes.

He too is small, a twig from her branch,
and you can see he will never be big
so he is learning to be a tough guy instead.

But now it's time for breakfast,
and the twig-woman takes him by the hand
and leads him off to McDonalds,
and the tough customer looks up at her
and beams.

2010

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

The Wolf Shed

Needing a roof on a windy night we came upon a shack above the logging zone.

We tiptoed in the twilight, afraid someone was inside,

and if so, what they might be.

No one was there so we made our beds

and slept. In the morning

we saw the claw marks in the wood,

and the hair in handfuls, suddenly free, and drifting out the door.

1986

Slugs

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

1991

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

Sleeping On My Hands

I sleep on my hands every night. As I pull the covers around me and prepare to let go, first on my right side, then on my left, I bunch both hands under the pillows, holding my head up through the night. My head may not need to be held up like this, but I cannot do otherwise, they go there on their own. And in the morning when I awake the stems of my wrists are sore and hollow and my fingers numb and cold and I feel I have been flat on a cot donating blood all night. Possibly my hands were intertwined this way in the drift and brine of my mother's womb, the twist of zero gravity for wet weeks on end. Or my head is so heavy from the ordeal of ordinary living that only my hands can prevent its sinking forever into mattress like a black hole of gristle, bone against wrist against skull against mind, as if I am taken down nightly from the cross, and set on my side in the darkness to rest and dream of the wounds in my palms and my heart bearing the sins of the world in my bones, diving sideways into time.

The Nightime Tide On Lake Winnebegoshish Lists Its Complaints

lsh			
lsh			
lsh			

1989

The Brood

To Rachel

I don't want to share anything with you,
I want to be alone late at night,
I want to drink until I'm dry,
I want to make secret journeys down the dank streets
where married men aren't allowed to go,
I want rooms of clinking crystal and appreciative smiles,
jokes tumbling from my lips like silvery grunions

I don't want to help carry groceries in from the station wagon,

groceries I will never get to eat, go for endless walks that take us nowhere, rub your back when mine is killing me.

I want sleep forever under sparkling snows

slapping in the moonlight.

and dream of ballgames and girlfriends and the years of good times

before this dagger snaked its way into my breast.

I am afraid of waters and doctors and the look on your face when you are in trouble.

I want to undo everything, erase my assent, irradiate my sperm, run off to a nation that is beaches only, with lotioned ladies lying bottom up, that welcomes heels and celebrates desertion and whose official flower is the beget-me-not.

And yet ...

to be father of this melon thing in you with all its sweet red stuff, and seeds and rind, I admit is a grand endeavor, and I see plainly in your eyes that this is your wish and because I am your slave by heart I accept the full penalty, let them come, let them swarm on me like ticks, I will bounce them and change them and wipe them clean as if they were my own and all the while knowing where once there was life is now only children, and the windblown fluff that was once my hide is all that remains of a boy who loved to play.

1987

In Tent

I would like the night to be over. I would like the morning to be ushered in. I would like my mattress to reinflate. I would like my sleeping bag to stay where I put it and not slide into the lowest corner of the tent. I would like the pain in my kidneys to ease. I would like to get up, find the tent zipper and pee in the bushes without stepping into some large forest mammal's summer scat. I would like to close my eyes and dream of happy times and happy places, like yesterday, and home, not dream about children tied to chairs and forced by cruel kidnappers to eat cold chop suey with pimentos, the La Choy kind. I would ask that whatever is making that chug-and-response sound down by the lake edge finish its business and shut up.

I would like my teeth to not taste like someone else's.

I would like to take a long shower and wash my butt,
and shampoo the pine sap out of my hair.

I would like, when morning finally does arrive, that I could stand and walk the way I used to, not this rickety post-stroke Walter Brennan hitch that last night left me with.

I would like for a day so sunny and so dry that it would drive the damp like Rommel's camels from my sodden bag and towels.

I would like for zippers to zip, stakes not to bend double,

socks not to electrostatically attract pine needle, foxtail, fly bodies and burr.

I would like my wife, who is sleeping so beautiful beside me,

her cheekbones catching the half-moon light, to awaken and offer me succor for my pains.

I would like if it nature did not require this expensive entourage for me to spend a night in it, and I call on God with all the influence

I can summon, allowing first that I do love the mountain and I do love the tree to explain why the cost of a little beauty is so much pain,

while I slump like Achilles in my tent, blinking at the nylon sky.

1990

The Art of the Deal

We all start life as raging egomaniacs, fists full of demands, demanding, ceding nothing to those around us.

As life goes on we are subdued

By the world, and it's one concession after another.

1995

Love Song of the Louse

Life in the forest is necessarily humid.

Moisture gleams from every limb and
your plaintive cursing fills the air.

I know we're not friends, but aren't we still close?

I mark and deposit, mark and deposit.

I whisper to the dendrites my sincerest affection.

Because no one knows you the way I do,
no one inhales you like a rose.

Oh, I am desperate for your scratch,
your tiny comb avails you not.

See, I am doing a slow dance in your fur.

1973

The Iliad

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

Phantom forces have met on the night-cloaked food-strewn fields and in their fierce combat shed blood and laid vegetables to waste.

Their waters turned clay vermilion, their dew that skidded and sprayed through the night now glitters in the rosy-fingered dawn.

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

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

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

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

1979

Hyperactive Landlord

Mr Hoveland, don't go out in the dead of night to buy fuses.

You are too brave, too dedicated to your work.

Tenants need peace from so much caretaking,

We need time to not be helped.

That rasping sound just now,
That sounds like someone sharpening an axe
on a turning stone?
It's just Mr Hoveland, at four in the morning,
shoveling an eighth-inch of snow from the drive.

1974

At The Koin-O-Kleen on Chicago Avenue

The enormous man on the sorting table, possibly Samoan, and naked to the waist, sips a can of Mr. Pibb through a straw.

Tattooed on his full right tit is the word SWEET, on his left the word SOUR.

1979

Rachel the Student

In the lab there was a cat. Its head shaved bare, and sticking out of a wad of putty was a wire.

When the cat saw Rachel come in, it jumped.

Only it didn't land on all fours, as most cats do.

It hit a cabinet drawer and fell on its side.

And Rachel wants to know what good is a cat like that.

Every day she bikes by the Masonic Cancer Hospital, chain grease blackening her nurse's scrub legs.

Today she a face in a window on the second floor, It was looking out at her, then pulled the drapes shut.

A big exam is on the way and she's missed her period and the cab driver neighbor upstairs plays Sonny Rollins late at night, and nothing she says makes any difference.

I don't understand it, she starts crying one day, why do people want to be mothers.

1975

Live At The Astor Pavilion

Up on the roof you hear the pitter patter of tiny sandwiches. In the basement the friends you keep have broken out, they are massing around the salt.

Outside your window a policeman is caressing his gun, and whispering devoutly -he will arrest himself before things go too far .

You lie in bed, fists gripping the sheets.

You can't feel a thing below your waist.

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

Your arms packed lunch in a brown paper bag.

Your inner organs wished them safe journey.

Your ears waved goodbye, wraithlike, when they peeled away.

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

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

At the end of the final corridor you see a wire stretched taut from wall to wall, a tightrope and a golden unicycle.

You remember a line: 'Love leaves you and you must go on.' Behind, the curtain rises.

1975

My Poor Fish ...

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

1977

The Man in the Air

The man in the air has been falling since Thursday.

He has an appointment on Sunday at noon.

Time is important -- he has always been punctual.

He checks his watch for the seventh time today.

In his mind he goes over the names of the clients ahead of him,

the names of their families, the physics of the perfect handshake.

My business is people, he says in the air.

I'm not selling pieces of paper,

I am selling satisfaction, I am selling myself.

He is almost sure how to do it this time.

A terrific idea will come to him soon;

until then, Pleasant day, unlike Friday, falling all afternoon and during the best hours of the early evening through light rain.

He holds out his hand in the rush of air.

Warmer now, almost perfect, he thinks.

Already I am having presentiments of success.

The man in the air is turning and twisting, the cloth of his trousers is flapping around him.

He is falling head first, he is sure he will get where he's traveling soon, falling upward like a stone.

1977

Checklist

- ✓ The fish are in the fish tank.
- ✓ The bread is in the plastic bag.
- ✓ Me waking up on the green divan.

The system is working!

1974

Letter From Como (1976)

Taking course to ospreys and ant lions and the mauve noodle stacked like rosaries in the outer office

Tonight it is quiet it is too quiet tonight

Taking course from the trail of rags and broken webbing

And the natives trembling under the giant banah leaves

And taking course dead reckoning from the moon

Directly chuckling like the Old Bombardier

Take my course to the sailor awash and aflat on the tarot deck

Take it to Queens and Pawtuxet and the all-nite laundromat

It steams like desire in the sleeping pile of woolens

And the natives pressed themselves thin as knives pressed

Against the quivering chandelier take it to Mom and Pop

And the aging cheerleader who ten years later still presses the torn photograph

Against her ribs

It is too quiet it is sinister, it is number than any number

And what do I do oh what please say is a pawpaw and a bobtail nag all the doodah day

Take it to America America in the springtime springtime in America

Because this is the garden of animal delight the clean scrape of the dish on cement

Taking course to red jackals and jaydaws and the red noodle

Nailed to the waiting room like old magazines

It is better than that it is steadier than that

How do you do and welcome to Fabricburg

You can't tell the fours from the threes

You can't tell the flowers from the screams

No wonder they say we were made out of mud Come out of your trees and your rivers and

Come to America come to Minnesota

Come to the click of cleats and the children straddling the giant tortoise

They have come, they have come for miles around

Come to the land of long letters of love the land of love

This is the land of the crackling barn and the land of the infernal flower

And the land of big shovels

This is the home town this the sublime

This is the black underside of a million raw tabletops

Love scarred like burnt pleasure and bubblegum

These are its children and those are its heights

These are the fingers meshed and twined like cotton candy

Peanut shucks and gosh the divine criminentlies

Come to the straw and the cane and urine flowing like soda

Come to the land of poultry and the love of the condom

Come to the rinsed kidneys of the lost tribes

And the land of small children and dogs

They teem in the refuse like ambassadors for change

Come to the Como when the hibiscus are in bloom and the drunks are in bloom

And the tree sloths parasites bloom green in the skin

Come to the green swarming pond this year we dredge there our memories

Of kindness and jewels and breadloaves and cannonshot rakes and quicksilver

Come when the tuna are jumping and the children are jumping at cornbread

And promises and time and the secrets of time

This spring the tiger is muttering remonstrances of love

And the banker noodle sits like a patient in the vestibule

Come to the 24-hour urgent care centers cursing the revolving doors

And the No Parking Zones and the decisive victory in the field

Come to the spreading joy of a thousand elm trees

Two years from blight and the skinny roots of love

And the thousand children jumping in the night

Taken in dreams to a place beyond mountains and the thousand mattresses

No one turns over any more

Come to Como Brother John and Alphaea

Take to the hard streets and the harder walls

And take course to the parklights bathing the lost kids

And take course down the trillion rows of lilies and rot

Take course to Como at a certain time of year

Now here now gone forever now at the tip of every tongue

Take course by hunted animals strung by ropes their bodies opened

To the wind and to love

Flies singing seafaring stories in the breeze

Open and battered to the slim curve of love

1974

When You Are Pope

When you are pope you can not be like other men.

You cannot be seen disappearing into limos

outside casinos or polishing off a beer at a corner tavern,

the old men snorting at your caftan and cap.

You cannot affect a commanding air,

pulling at your cincture and laughing like a man,

you must be humble all the day,

you must be unworthy to loosen the bootstraps of the world,

even if you are not feeling humble, or humble has become

tiresome as a singsong prayer.

Everyone is your boss because everyone knows you and expects certain behavior.

No spitting, no grumpiness, no annoyance with fools for if you show any signs of being human they will not let you be pope any more and you will wind up on a bridge somewhere selling windup toys or grilled kebabs and people will come up

to you squinting

saying I know you.

You must always be for life and always be for peace and never concede the fact that everybody dies and the world is

ripe with people

who could benefit richly from a ferocious beating and everyone knows it but you are not allowed to say it. People go one and on about this saint and that saint and you can say nothing though you know all the evidence in all

their files.

who was too fond of the muscatel, who wrote letters of an

unholy nature,

who masturbated with the lilies of the field, and who,

when the dog the body was disinterred and the coffin cracked

the look on their face was a maniac grin, frozen that way

for eternity.

It is hard to keep up with friends.

It is just not the same once you are pope.

They are so fond of you now, fonder than they ever were before

and nothing you say gets through to them,

they won't let you be honest any more.

There are times you want to burst out crying and tell them

everything

what a crock the Vatican is and what assholes the cardinals all

are

and what you would give just to sit and play cards and sip gin

like you used to years ago before people stopped listening.

When you are pope you understand your career has probably peaked,

there will probably not be many achievements after this,

it will be unusual even to catch a fish

on a Saturday in an aluminum boat, the little waves banging

against

the prow, and haul it flipping

into your net. You will look over your shoulder and the lake will

be full

of other boats, and film crews and helicopters, and people will

say it's not a fish,

it's an allegory, you have to think about this on a very complex

level,

nothing is simple any more.

When you are pope it is sadder than you imagined.

The devout and the suffering look to you as if you had the

answers

for their madness, for the cough that has been getting worse,

for the world in arms, and the torture of the faithful over slow

flames,

and you would do anything to take away the pain but what can you do, you are only a pope.

Your faith that never let you down before

is suspect, you haven't heard from God in years,

he is like some clever zephyr that blows into town and blows

out again,

now you see him, then for thousands of years you don't, and if gets to be too much and you start to doubt it's your fault,

where's your faith you sad son of a bitch, I was just waiting

for this moment, I knew you would disappoint me.

And now the light pours in at Castle Gandolfo, and you awaken

late

and your kidneys ache and you wonder how long you can carry

the cross

for the rest of the world, and you think of a girl you knew in school, and you wonder what became of her,

if she got old and fat and lost that look that lifted you up off

your feet

all those years ago or she is still who she was, only better,

a lifetime later, and all this time she could have been your

friend,

and you turn in the bedsheets, holding your side, you feel as if a spear that fetched water from you, and it is seeping away like raindrops from the body, shiny as silver, as famous as dust.

1992

At Swanson Lake

from little girls' hineys

Little Cora floated in an inner tube,

butt poking through, and footy-paddled into the reeds. When she emerged she was covered with a hundred black leeches. Her sisters screamed and would not help, the mother and brother knelt and began to pick them off but the young were so small that when you picked them from a toenail they squiggled under your fingernail. Finally the two got to the bathing suit and the brother began to cry and ran away because up one sat the mother of the brood, bigger around than a tricycle tire so the mom made several forays to fetch her out, she wished there were a tool that could pluck monster leeches

but there was only her fingers that could not get a grip

on the slithery thing
and when she finally grasped it around the middle and
tugged it out, making a schlocking sound
and Cora cried with all her might
and stood on the sand,
naked, suckered, and blinking
on the sand.

2007

God Told Me to Tell You to Cut Your Hair

(for a friend afflicted with sexual compulsivity)
God told me to tell you to get a haircut.

Here's how he explained it:

Long hair is a sign of defiance.

Long hair is a sign of androgyny.

Long hair is a sign of childhood.

Samson had long hair,

but he was proud and he lost it

and had to go from pillar to post to reclaim it.

Jesus had long hair.

And you're not him.

Your sign is the sign of the Leatherneck.

Get a Marine cut, down to the nub.

Signal subtly to everyone who meets you

that you are a different guy.

No longer windblown and endlessly complex

but simple as the stubble on your scalp.

Then, be that guy. In three and a half weeks,

go get another haircut.

Don't let it grow back ever again.

If people ask you about the new look,

sneer and say, 'I'm on a mission from God.'
Every time you look in the mirror, think:
"I am a Marine. I do the dirty work.
I do what I'm told. I don't have a brain.
I have give everything away,
284 Midnight at the Mounds (2004)
and I don't take anything back."
Shame is for sissies and you
Are a natural killer

Prayer for Refuge

God get me out of here
Save me from salesmen
And preachers in denim,
From long conversations
With etherized patients.
From boredom in the afternoon
And the smell of cheap perfume.
Shield me from the words
And consequences I deserve.
Maintain a sense of possibility
Put turbined slippers on my feet.
So at a moment's notice I can flee
From lolling tongues to thee.

2004

Puff

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 arise

From the core of a golden sun

And the day of blooming

Has been gathering inside

The whole while

2002

Picnic At Lascaux

Down the twisty corridors the animals dance by torchlight.

The bison and the bison, wild bull and wild bull.

The reindeer curtsies to his partner, who licks him on the brow.

The wet muzzles of ancient cows exhale snow in the crowded hall.

The walls grow closer and the calcite drips longer

And the jaws of the father grind down upon the son.

The mountain of ice and the museum of fire,

the colors of oxide and manganese mingle.

Concavities bloom and convexities swell and the mountain museum devours

A hillful of christs poking out of the ground.

There is Vincent shot through the lung.

And Henri drowned in the ink in his well.

Verlaine shoots Rimbaud and Rimbaud shoots Verlaine.

And there is Picasso bowing before the rhino.

And there is Duchamps on his stuttering staircase.

The knot of mares of Marc Chagall

float upside down on the flickering wall

And ice and stalactite take their toll of the rust and charcoal and oil.

The bear and the elk and the ox and the bull -The cave grinds hard against the bones of all
and sunshine collapses to a tiny black ball.

2009

The Kindly Cannon

Goodwill was all he cared about and everyone he came upon he blessed with shining gladness.

Eight pounds round was his heart of iron and matchsticks were his friends.

2011

L'abbaye de Les Abeilles

(Abbey of the bees)

In Caunes-Minervois the Cathares were put to the torch,

Twelfth-century hippies whose simplicity offended The powers that were.

This afternoon I read in the Abbey of St. Adelbert,

A hotel now, with motion sensors

For late-night stair climbing.

Between a crack in the courtyard wall

Honeybees exit to forage for flowers,

mute apart from a casual hum.

Narcissus, chrysanthemum, hydrangea and rose,

A friend to those who cannot

find the Latin words to pray.

The Albigensians have resumed their positions,

High in the ramparts they toil,

Stings sheathed.

They go about their business in the beauty

They spite both government and the church,

Their only objective is sweetness.

No earthly power can tear them from their hive

And only light substantiates

Their song.

At Fifty-Eight

It is something to celebrate, the day one turns fifty eight.

It is the midpoint of life's domain -- the fun half spent, the rest remains,

one slowly cranks up the first high bend then roars like thunder to the end,

I hoist the bag of bent clubs that are mine and commence the back nine.

2008

God's Body

The campaign raged into its eighth decade, hopeless from the get-go.

All God had to do was think of his enemies and they ceased to exist.

You would be talking to a guy, and suddenly he was no longer there.

God would wait until they got within a spear-throw to blink,

and then he laughed that awful empty laugh. What an asshole he was.

And that was why, despite the danger, there was never a shortage of volunteers.

They signed up by the thousands, eager to end the tyranny, the caprice,

and above all that gruesome, horrible laugh.

And the soldiers fought all their lives, until God thought of them and they died.

The Lord God mowed them down by the millions, and he laughed his awful belly-laugh.

One day God slipped up, he became intoxicated with his own self-regard

and lapsed into a kind of holy coma.

A group of commandos came upon him as he lay openmouthed on the sand,

and they lanced him in the neck and armpit and groin. Divine blood rushed from his wounds,

till the seashore stank for miles. It was a mighty and an unexpected victory.

Without asking, they stripped his body with long knives,

and peeled away his fat in lengthy strips. They rendered the fat.

which screamed in the cauldron, and filtered it through cheesecloth.

Altogether they saved thirty-two barrels of oil from God's body.

The oil was distributed to the people of the world, who burned it in lamps.

The lamps stayed lit for the lifetimes of the people. They read, and talked, and danced,

and it was their turn to laugh, to the light of God's pure oil.

And though they were nervous about the darkness that was coming,

they had no regrets.

2010

The Monster

arises at 6 am daily, commences abominations everywhere he goes he shits on beauty and not just a little, it is remarkable how it disperses an oscillating propeller fans the shit till it is everywhere and if you ask him what he thinks he is doing he will say, I honor it with my attention and my stink he is drawn to beauty but then must soil it he wants to be close to it to climb into its body it is the very intimacy that is so unnerving and after a while things are not so beautiful then the monster moves on, and he takes the family with him and all of them glad to lie down among flowers

Prayer for Poets

Let a thing be what we say it is.

If a donkey is eating corn, let the donkey

not be an allegory nor the corn a corn byproduct.

Let us not despise readers for not getting us

When we did nothing to let them in,
And everything to keep them out.
Let every offering be a gift,
First from you and then from us.
Let 'Let this serve you well' be both
Credo and manifesto.
Do not let us fall down
The well of our awareness.
Neither let us feel special
Just because we hear music.
Lead us not into obscurity,
And deliver us from brilliance.

2006

For thine is the poem

Forever amen.

Stooping to Pick Up a Pill ...

that rolled onto the floor
and under the kitchen table.
I bend at the back but that's no good.
I get down on my bony knees
but then my shoulder is in the way
and my neck starts to strain.
I get all the way down to the table
and duck my head under,
till I hear myself wheeze
and the heart begins to thump

and the big vein pulses up top
and the follicles weep
then there it is, is the pink pearl
now bearded with bunny dust.
I hold the pill between two fingers
like a host and think this is not
the way I hope I die.

2007

Is There NASCAR in Heaven?

There surely must be because of the glory

But obviously minus the advertisements.

They will not be selling Winston and Kool 100s there.

The afterlife is noncommercial though the cigarettes are free

And instead of cars which depend on resistance we will have something looser,

I am thinking of songcars -- you just sing and off you go.

There's no burning rubber in heaven, there's no needle teetering on the red

And the guy at the loudspeaker as also the guy with the checkered flag

He's also the clown with the multicolored wig

And up in the stands throwing down Crackerjack that's him again,

and slapping the mustard stain on his thigh, him too.

And instead of celebrity drivers like Richard and A.J. we will all be sitting at the wheel.

all of us movie stars in our astronaut suits and the bugs on our teeth.

they don't even die -- they brush themselves off and fly away.

2010

Toggle

Everything we know suggests decline.

Pebbles tumble down mountains. The whale lies gasping on the sand. My undying love for you fades. It is a wind-down world, and we place a chair under every doorknob to slow down the entropy, to hinder the dying programmed into each cell. But what if there were a toggle switch located on the side of the box. which flicking winds us up instead of down? Play with it yourself and see. Down, we slip into death and depression. Flick up, the sun lights up the tomb. Instead of draining we recharge, Instead of dying we stand erect. Diving backwards from pool to board, Hearts quickening, love bounding, The need to race to conclusions dwindling because we were not in the hurry we thought.

2010

Staples

What else fits together the way they do -- 5000 to a box, arranged in sticks 150 long, and then the sticks are nested into one another. Now that's packaging.

A small box of staples would make a good weapon,

like brass knuckles, because of its heft but you could only use it once,

because the glued-together sticks would all come apart, not into a haystack of individual miniature croquet wickets, but just come apart often enough that the purity of the formation would be wrecked and if you put them in a stapler and went to town

the chances of one misfiring at some point are pretty good, and it would get caught in the teeth of the cheap chrome mouth,

and you would need a toothpick or something to pry it loose, and a few shots over the bow to clear the stapler's throat and get it working again -- an impressive technology.

But if you put this box of staples away, in a drawer or on a shelf.

forget about it, because those things are gone.

1991

Aphorism

Experience makes you what you are, on its way to destroying you.

1990

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

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 rhinoceros beetle

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

Poetry Magazine Editors

They don't want to be your friend, so don't pretend to be pals.

When I was younger I sometimes acted like I already knew the editor

and tried cashing in now on some faded memory.

"This entry bubbled up at Meatloaf this spring, naturally I thought of you first, Tom."

See what I'm doing there?

The false familiarity, the name-dropping, the harking to the past.

Editors may get confused and think they drank screwdrivers with grenadine

with you one night on the white rocks up above the river as the two of you

lay on your backs together ticking off the constellations.

You don't want to forget something like that, even if it never happened.

Poetry editors don't even want to like your work, being enthusiastic

makes them feel weak, like they gave in to you too easily.

Basically they are just trying their best to keep the worst stuff out of their magazines,

because their goal is to be seen as lovers of literature,

but not slaves to any particular style, which is another way to be weak.

They know in their hearts they are failing, because look at the really good magazines

and then look at theirs, and look at the other mailings lists and then look at theirs, mostly nobodies and nitwits and hopeful hangers-on.

Editors feel they are sitting in a room spattered with shit, and much of this

is because they were trying to be nice.

There are different approaches you can take -- the most boring one is to announce,

wearily, that you are submitting X poems, and that you published recently

in The This Review and had an item in The Journal of That,

and aren't you a classy item, ringing up these publishing credits

until you taste a bit of your own vomit in your mouth, that's how real

your bland braggadocio strikes even you.

But what else do you have? The poem? Give me a break, you know yourself

from a lifetime of trying that no one is even trying to "get" things any more.

I mean, what's to get? Words on paper, an attitude, spare language, you're in.

Or what if you dug deep down into your soul and fetched up a panting masterpiece, heaving and twitching on the table? No one will even see it.

No one will get what you had to do to land that thing and now it convicts you with its intensity. Best advice is just to grovel.

"Oh, thank you for the important work you do, I know no one appreciates it

as much as you would like, but I want you to know that I appreciate it.

I am the one leper in ten who came back to thank the poetry editor

for being so insightful and kind, for seeing light and beauty where everyone else just saw mental illness.

And isn't that their true mission in the end, sponging the flecks of foam from your lips?

"We were touched by the elegy to the spaniel puppy that died in 1994.

The world is better that you never got over it. Next time, get him immunized."

There is so much unhappiness here masquerading as wisdom and the preservation of standards, when everyone knows there are none.

No one knows where to break a line any more. and that boat is not swinging back into port any time soon. And yet,

if we never share these thoughts, they would be like those trees

you hear about but never hear, because they fell alone, in some faraway forest,

and their life stepped out of them, and stepped away into the rustle of the pines.

Oh little magazine editor, why don't you stop hoping for better and embrace my work!

2012

The Thing Writers Never Learn, Or Anyone Else For That Matter

The thing we never learn is why.

In writing, we are rejected every day, but it is considered poor form to ask the editor why.

Editor -- is the writing poor? Is the point of the writing stupid, or obvious?

Or are you just looking for something very different, something your heart is set on,

but even though you are among the most articulate people currently breathing,

you cannot say what it is exactly.

Rejection is painful, and I understand editors are loath to be interrogated,

especially from people who may be unstable or argumentative.

Writers are just supposed to figure this out themselves,

using the same brain that wrote the failed piece.

But what valuable input it would be to get an explanation:

"It was OK but it didn't amaze me."

"I couldn't tell if you were an asshole or not."

"There is something seriously wrong with your whole attitude,

that I can't quite put a finger on, but trust me, it's awful."

This is more than a problem with writing, it's a problem of your whole life,

never getting the feedback that is obvious to others, but you never understand,

because, to you, you are just normal, the taste of water in your mouth.

Something is wrong, and everyone sees it, but no one loves you enough

to tell you the terrible truth. -

2012

Storm

Dense shoulder of the thunderhead cloud – Wind shushing the terrified trees – The rains rain down like ripping curtains -- Reckless as the drunken river's swerve – What is that pitchfork that lights up the sky? Why do the willows whip one another?

Who is it that makes these awful moans?

1971

In L.A. With George

I was in LA, and a mutual friend said George was anxious to see me.

We drove along the beach till we came to his wife's fashion salon, and I was led in.

A busy, happy woman with cropped curls gestured behind her and laughed.

This is where the money went, she said, and we laughed.

I shook hands with the retinue.

Some of the members of the old band were still there, including the saxophonist

with the scars on his nose whose name I could never remember.

I met George's son, whom I had never met before, he was almost grown,

and resembled his father, handsome and quiet and composed.

I was taken aback by him, and couldn't think of anything to say.

They wheeled out an exquisite cake that said "Welcome back, Mike,"

with a picture of us five lads, one shaking a tambourine, with buttercream dahlias and frosting cherries, created by some impressive celebrity baker.

And when George arrived in the van everyone crowded around him,

but after touching his son's face he went straight to me and hugged me and we rocked happily for a moment, reunited,

and I remembered the good times on tour, and how they always

dropped me off again at the gray house on the little hill, and I would sneak inside to bed. I could see the lines in George's eyes,

and his hair had thinned but his grin was still stupendous, and he peppered me with questions about my family and my life

and rebuked me for not bringing photos.

During the meals, seeing the love they all had, I felt tears come to my eyes,

and I burst out and told them I didn't deserve them as friends,

they were so genuine and kind, and I was sorry I had not stayed in touch,

and I was so sorry about John, and I was sorry I had gotten old and fat

and become a business writer and lost the music, and someone patted my back while I sobbed.

And in his thick scouse George quietly said none of that mattered,

I had gotten away but we were together again, and we would always be mates,

and this day was for us to remember and to share.

And they lifted their glasses of soda water and lime.

When the alarm sounded I went to my daughter's room.

She lay there sleeping with her finger in a closed paperback.

I kissed her several times on her smooth forehead.

She emerged from her sleeping bag like a rose in bloom and told me my hands were cold, and smiled her lovely smile.

We could hear the diesel idle of the garbage truck in the alley

and the birds in the maple tree sang.

1991

Transformer

During our courtship Rachel would visit my apartment.

One day she was at the door and heard the music on the stereo.

It was Lou Reed, whom I had been a fan of for years.

She frowned, perplexed. "Why do you like that?" she asked.

"He just sounds like some sick show-off."

I prepared a defense in my mind, about Reed being a voice for the alienated,

reflecting a brutal but refreshing post-Aquarian ethic,

plus he had that chunky guitar thing going.
But she was right, he was a sick show-off.
Everything else he might be, he definitely was that.
She stepped into the kitchen, evaluating its potential, hands on her hips, utterly happy.
I slumped in my chair, and wondered what the future would bring.

1984

Alongside Beggar's Creek

The poplar leaves in the breeze are silver coins that like to shimmy.

They are thousands of tiny cupped hands saying gimmee gimmee

Stacked Up

I awoke to cold sheets
and a rooster crowing atop the upright piano
and then I woke up to my name being called,
it was my mother, hollering
down by the cattails
and then I woke up to the klaxon sound
and a ladder leaning against the window apron
and then I woke up, trying to remember
something important
something about -- something
and then I woke up in an incubator
and the face prying out of the eggshell

was mine

and then I woke up and you were there, and you were there – you were all there and when I woke up, there were tiny turtles everywhere

1969

Richard Fariña

Richard Fariña called to us saying,

If somehow you could pack up your sorrows and send them all to me,

you would lose them, I know how to use them ... and so on.

And my callback, 45 years since he flipped over the handlebars,

breaking his neck, is what a kind offer that was.

We will lose them. He knows how to use them.

But what did that mean? What use could our sorrows be put to?

I lie awake nights pondering this mystery.

He did not promise to store them in a mountain where they no longer cause pain.

He did not refashion them into something useful, like spatulas or lawn furniture.

He did not break them down chemically until the active ingredients become inert.

He did not monetize them and direct the proceeds toward feeding the hungry,

or fresh bandages for those torn apart by war.

Richard Fariña, I don't think you were being figurative.

You had a plan you never got to share.

Instead you flew off the cycle and into the barbwire,

and your money and notebook spilled out of your pockets and into a puddle.

You had seen mountains climb down from the mountains,

saw the seas part, saw giants roam the plains in search of corn.

You knew how to reprocess the sorrows of the world.

You knew the secret, it was in the spiral notebook.

Instead you added to them, front wheel spinning in the morning air.

1980

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LmHjJw8Kefc

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!

1977

For the Young Poets of Cleveland

Your readers are your babies, your treasure, but don't treat them like babies.

They need to feel the thud of the hammer, they need to feel the thump of the heart.

Talk like they are the best friend you have.

Tell them the amazing things you have learned,

Confess to the fears that rattle your dreams.

Grieve privately, then come back roaring without hope, without god, without anything in the world.

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

114

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?

2012

Opportunity Costs

In business it means, if you do one thing, what does that prevent you from doing instead?
And after you decide this thing, any investment you make is sunk.
You can never get it back,
Any more than you can leap backward from the pool to the diving board.
And that is the essence of the lives we live, opportunities selected and efforts, once taken, that are unrecoverable, which gives every breath we take new meaning.

Index Card Pinned to The Nungalvik Hotel Corkboard in Kotzebue. Alaska

Woman's diamond ring
Fits up to size 10
Never worn
Must see to appreciate
\$400, firm

2010

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

The Man Who Thrived on Refusal

A man with too-tender feelings needed to change.

He approached a diner in a restaurant and said,

"That pork chop looks delicious. May I eat it?"

"Under no circumstances," the diner replied and sent the man away.

He passed a note to a bank teller:
"Would you put \$20,000 in this bag for me?"
The teller consulted with his supervisor,
who invited the man to open an account.

He then approached a beautiful woman and said to her: "Abandon your father's name and give me your body!" The woman hugged her boyfriend's arm and scurried away.

The man saved all these refusals in a biscuit tin that he kept on top of the refrigerator.

"With every refusal, every day, I grow stronger," he said.

"Every time they say no I see farther!"

2013

truth.

Your Best Friends Won't Tell You

What it is that is holding you back.

It would be so easy to say, You talk too much,

Or you think you're so smart, or so funny,

Or you're chickenshit about this and that.

If we knew these things, perhaps we could change and stop annoying others the way we routinely do.

And wouldn't our lives take a giant step forward then.

But our friends love us too much to hurt us.

They don't want to be the ones who tell the terrible

Neither do they want to lose us, to be left behind as unloyal

while we skip off to be with our new friends,

who see us in our freshly repaired state but will never know who we really are.

2006

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 bitch," exclaimed Holly aloud. "All the time I was looking the wrong direction!"

Old Man Stone Is Called To His Reward

Thanks to Joe Paddock for telling me this classic true story from an oral history he helped compile in Renville County in the 1970s.

Stone was a mean old man, whole town of Kinbrae knew

that for entertainment he used to take pot shots at his dog,

a good old girl deserving better.

One day Stone was said to have got bad news from Montevideo,

folks saw him storm out the post office, kicking dust, spitting on the sidewalk

and cussing out the Goosetown Savings & Loan.

Mr. Miller, the barber, said Stone purchased a package of Illinois whiskey

and that was what they found later on, a broken pint bottle

by the pump house well that'd just gone dry.

Stone must have hauled his rifle down where it hung by the stove

and stomped out to the yard with a box of fresh shells,

loaded and reloaded, pumped lead into the milkshed wall

and cackled and gnashed his nasty teeth.

Yellow tears skittered down his dry cheeks as the dark deed formed in his mind,

the notion of completing the thing for once and for all, and he whistled Betty to heel at his feet.

And she sidled, shivering, up and imploringly searched for the better nature

she sometimes witnessed behind his red eyes

as he pulled two sticks of dynamite from a toolbin and tied them to the poor bitch's tail,

lit the long fuse, smacked her hind end and sat down on the hole

and watched through the open outhouse door as the dog took off yelping

straight through the kitchen doorway and dove under the master's brasspost bed

with the eiderdown comforter pulled down in after her.

No no no no, cried Stone, and he screamed with all his saw-toothed might

with the indignation of a man so wronged by creation and perverted

by willful beasts like a dog so dumb she couldn't even get blown up right,

and he screeched her name and called her forth and condemned her disloyalty

as the least-best friend a most-cursed man might have,

a churlish cur who fought his dominion from the day she was whelped,

who skipped naps thinking up ways to undo him, him, him

who now wailed like a ghost to get out, get out, get out, get out

of my pine-board, tar-paper, china platter house God damn your four-legged soul.

And Betty, hearing his breakdown without and imagining herself the object

of some grand reprieve at the hands of this fiery and possibly lovable

if you really undertook to know him, but until then deeply disliked failure of a man

and imagining moreover her lifelong ordeal at those knotted hands

to be miraculously over and herself forgiven of the unforgivable crime

of having been his dog, dashed happily down the creekstone steps

and full tilt and with her master's heartfelt cries of no no no no

echoing across the furrowed glade leaped gladly into his awe-crossed arms

and the two best friends saw eye to eye, each bade goodbye, and left Kinbrae together.

1976

The Spirits of Paul and Joanne

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

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

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

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

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

To be of use, that is all they want, atonement in the grease and gravel and lesser people's luck.
This simplicity saved them from fame in life. Your cracked distributor cap outweighs every glory they have known.

And when the emergency has been resolved, you wave goodbye and they smile through clutched raincoats and return to their car to serve the next living soul in need of help.

Circling St. Thomas on Good Friday 1983

A cold warm day in April or May when the crocuses are ready to play, the cowards crouch behind bolted doors while the brave are out running their course, occasional showers and occasions of sin, sweat melts on the sidewalk and moistens the skin. water flows from me as the pounding twists my grin into grimace, my hands into fists. How many times my scalp has run wet and there was no veil to catch my sweat? Our father in a Catholic city, I love the Jew who died for me though it is all nonsense, I acknowledge, pounding the pavement around the college. April is a foolish, cruelish month and the zephyrs are lifting the skirts of the nuns and spinning circulars across the lawns. The wheel is turning the circle complete -the earth rolls away beneath my feet.

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.

Where Birds Fare Well

Swallow on telephone lines,
Doves in the underbrush,
Hawks in ruins and cathedral rafters,
Crows on the shoulders of fallen soldiers,
Peacocks on staircases,
Canaries in the offices of motel managers,
Parrots in rich women's kitchens,
Whippoorwills sobbing
in the branches of trees
on long summer nights.
Sparrows on rooftops, in hedges and haylofts,

Eagles ensconced atop immaculate mountains,
Herons in marshes,
Swans in canals and in fountains,
Skylarks sing into the sun,
Owls in cemeteries,
And cuckoos in the heads
of young
men.

We Declare

Jefferson, Adams and Hancock wrote verse.
Ben Franklin was better than those.
But when it was time for "When, in the course"
They all had the sense to write prose.

Their Cries

Underfoot the worms awake.

The sudden flood from the oscillating sprinkler is intolerable to them, and they push to the surface pink and brown and nearly straight like little socks hung out to dry and exposed to the idiot sun and if I had the right kind of ears I am sure I would hear them gasp.

2009

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

I Saw a Deer So Now I Must Write a Poem

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

standing on the shoulder, its side all rough as if scraped against stone,

then bolting into traffic, dodging cars, leaping over the lane divider,

skidding away from a trailer truck, then vaulting onto a bank of loose slag,

and dancing, whitetail bounding, back into the trees.

The wrong place at the wrong time, rush hour -- lucky it didn't get run over.

Motorists were shocked, workers stared openmouthed.

The frantic look in the deer's eyes spelled terror, confusion, the suggestion of reproach.

Deer and construction sites don't mesh, the deer are so fragile sprinting between bulldozers.

The overarching sense that road construction is wrong and cars should pull over

and give the natural order the right of way and any poet seeing a deer in the wild

must file a complete report, express solidarity with the animal,

remorse for the thud of mankind, acknowledge complicity in the hazing of innocent blood.

I was thinking that if deer had short legs and made grunting noises

there would be a lot fewer poems about them.

1989

For Robert Plant On My 66th Birthday

Found myself watching him on TV tonight.

He is old and wrinkly, and doesn't move too well.

But he is still kicking it, and the camera cut to young women -

who are *thrilled* by what he is doing.

And I have to think, why didn't that happen to me?

I wanted *exactly* what he got – love, adulation, honeydripping passion.

But I wasn't able to go there, in my writing.

It helps to have a big bottom, the drums and bass, I mean.

With the big beat, you forget about making sense, you just go.

And your lyrics only need to be fairy tales and dick promises.

I could never bring myself to do that.

In my mind my lines went deeper and more thoughtful -- about love and loss and wondering and such.

At least I thought so. I hoped so. But it didn't work out for me.

I estimate he has made \$100+ million from his art over 50 years,

and I have made maybe \$1500 -- no comparison, really.

This may seem like not the greatest injustice ever perpetrated,

but tonight it is the one I am focusing on.

He's just some white English guy, who really has no right to the blues --

and let me concede that I don't, either.

Now, I am sympathetic to the blues. I have never been sued by the blues.

But there he is embodying them in some strange way. How I hate him.

Not hate exactly -- but he is truly awful, comfortable touching himself

in front of people, where I always pull back from that,

he knows he's hideous and he just doesn't care,

he keeps going in for his curly permanent, all that dope and all those blow jobs

haven't made his hair fall out, and that seems wrong to me.

I pull back, it just doesn't seem to be what the eleven people at my shows come for.

But just now I will be honest and say, 50 years late,

I too wanted to be a disgrace, I too wanted to be loved, like him.

despite never doing one kind thing, or shedding a single sincere tear.

I was always held back by my shame --

always held back by my shame.

2016

The Soul's Analogy

The soul is to its body as a worker to the farm

The soul wants to please and it wants to be retained,

not get let go into the cold to lick the frozen bowl

it wants a good relationship and will work to maintain it

it is willing to learn and to adapt but it has its limits, too

just to be there, and to breathe your farty air is heaven to hm

problem is the soul is made of muscle and fur, it is real

while the body seeks limited liability for the day it sends the soul away,

the body cannot stem corruption because it is just a corporation

The Lazarus Cheese, A Fromager's Tale

and when it hardens place it in the cave.

The fungi are drawn to dark moisture,

"We milk the sheep and stir the milk

and swarm over the great white wheels, and cover them with a leathery skin.

But the cheese is so warm it radiates its sunshine deep in the darkness and the fungi then seep into the light.

Then the spiders descend and they are hungry for the fruit.

They lay their eggs around the wheel like a drapery to protect it.

After five years we remember there is cheese down there deep within the cave and we fetch it wrapped in cloth. It is like a monster made of monsters and we cut it open and it breathes, from its very depths it gasps and exudes its bouquet."

"But it is so sweet," I say, "So delicious!"

"Yes," said the fromager -- but for five black years it was death!"

2005

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DUv...

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

Priests

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

Poetry: The Big Nothing

Inspired by a verse of Rumi (1369-1420)

Every tradesman searches for what's not there to polish his craft:

A builder locates the rot where the roof caved in.

A handyman pauses at the house with no door.

A street vendor hails the hungry man.

Workers rush into any hint of emptiness, which they then fill.

All happiness begins in emptiness, don't avoid it.

This empty cask, this chilling apprehension, this anxious possibility

contains everything you need!

If you are not friends with the great nothing, why do you cast your net into it, over and over, and wait so patiently?

This dark ocean gives you everything, you call it "death," though it is your breakfast.

Always the comedian, God authorizes spiritual somersaults, so we see the snake pit as something to investigate, and the surrounding orchard as swarming with bees. That's how mixed-up our notion of death is.

Your mother and father come to you in dreams, they are your attachment to comfortable habits. Ignore them, they are not your true family. They seem to protect ... but in fact they imprison. They make you afraid of the emptiness when emptiness is what we really need.

One day you will laugh at your own stupid convictions! Your body is a friend and a host to the soul but it gives such shitty advice. It would have you don armor in peacetime, you would freeze in the summer and swelter in the cold.

The body's certitudes are like a new hire who does know yet where things are, so you have to follow him around all day showing him how to do his job.

But patience with emptiness is its own reward, because patience lets you become who you are.

The rose is fragrant because it abides with the thorn.

The young camel sucks, still nursing in its third year.

The beauty of embroidery is the patience encoded in it.

And patience is what the prophets teach us.

Friendship is strong because it takes time to form.

Feeling lonely and resentful prove you haven't been patient.

Be one of those who blend with God
as honey blends with milk, and say, with me,
"Anything that flickers,
comes and goes,
rises and sets,
up and down,
over and over,
that's not where my love is."

Either that, dear poet ...
or be a caravan fire ...
left to flare itself out ...
alone ...
out along the darkening road!

2004

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, he says
I have a feeling this is my lucky day

August 2009

Foolscap

The village fool at the medieval fair is a knave in motley colors, short of stature and round of belly, who only communicates with audiences by way of duck call. He speaks in phrases and complete sentences, but the sounds, they're all duck sounds. You can sort of tell what he is saying —whether it's a question, a declaration, or a curse -- by the rise and fall of the duck-quacks.

He does some bad magic tricks — pulling a handkerchief full of holes from his pocket — and scowls at the village crowd when they hoot at him, berating them with a stream of foul quacks. This is very successful, and the hat is passed, and dollar bills are collected.

Now the fool needs a volunteer from the audience, and chooses from the people surrounding him on benches an 8-year-old boy with droopy eyes.

The moment the small boy steps before the crowd they see he is not an easy-going child. He seems fearful of the situation, but determined to do well in it. To him, this moment on the medieval stage is a serious one. He stares out at the faces in ferocious dignity.

But the fool is foolhardy. He thinks he can get thebetter of the boy. Quacking a command with his duck call, he hands the boy a sheet of foolscap, like the one he himself is holding. The two stand side by side, until the

boy realizes he is supposed to imitate whatever the fool does.

The fool shrugs and begins to tear his foolscap paperinto a pile of long strips. He drops these strips at his own feet.

The little boy, imitating the fool, tears his paper into strips, too, and drops them at his feet.

Now it happens. The fool picks up his scraps, rolls them in his hands into a round wad, and then unwraps the ball. Magic has happened – the torn paper is now intact again, untorn.

The crowd applauds.

But all the boy can do, blinking, is pick up his mess of tatters, hold them in his hands and, lower lip trembling, gaze into the permanence of his tearing.

The audience creeps to the edge of the benches. All eyes are on the boy. All are terrified that he will melt before their eyes. The fool, suddenly not so foolish, also stares into the boy's eyes, a look of out-of-character concern illuminating his face.

For the first time the fool realizes he has a problem. He is in the verge of breaking a proud little boy's heart in plain view of a hundred people.

Moments pass.

And then, suddenly, a solution. The fool takes his restored paper in hand again, rips it to bits and tosses the scraps into the air. They hang for a moment, like duck feathers, and then they fall.

The fool kneels and hugs the boy, who stares at him with open mouth.

And the crowd, which has become a village, cheers.

Born on the Fourth of July

July 2, 1999

The Fourth of July has always been a special holiday for me, because I was born on it, in 1950, in a little hospital in Flint, Michigan.

The standard remark people have made to me, on discovering this fact, is: "Well, you sure must have come in with a bang!" If I'm in a good mood, I let them live.

But if you have to be born on a holiday, I enthusiastically endorse the Fourth. Halloween? No one's coming to your party. Thanksgiving's no good; a day devoted to decency leaves little latitude for merriment. If you're born on Christmas, the holiday of a thousand presents, you either feel your birthday was stolen from you or that you are the promised one.

But the Fourth is celebratory and so public. It's Independence Day, the day everyone is born. Uncle Sam stands free on stilts, little kids freely mimic the fireflies with their sparklers, the muscle cars at the main intersection rev their engines waiting for the light to change.

Deep down, or not so deep down, America has always been a little crazy. And if today's your birthday, you're all the good things -- democracy, modernity, and rock and roll -- rolled into a big bionic firecracker.

How many nights I have sat on grass growing damp under the blanket, as the fire department readies the display.

You arrive at dusk, and it's another ninety minutes before the first fuse is lit. By the time it starts, your elbows and neck are already aching, and the mosquitoes have made you half crazy from biting. But then the rockets go up, and they reach their apex, and for an instant time stands still, then -- kapow.

If you get a chance, rent the 1984 Godfrey Reggio movie *Koyaanisqaatsi*, subtitled *Life out of Balance*, and see it on the biggest screen available. It's a wordless cinematographic documentary that pioneered many film techniques that are cliche today, like clouds racing across the city sky, and sped-up freeways.

The effect is to contrast the tacky vanity of human endeavors with the gorgeous panoramas of nature and time. But the last eleven minutes of the movie are heartbreaking. While Philip Glass's melancholy organ fugue endlessly spirals and repeats, the camera follows a Titan rocket launch in slow-motion.

Somehow, despite the incredible speed of the launch, the camera stays focused on the rocket. You feel you are right next to the doomed vessel. You know nothing about the rocket's contents or the plans for the launch. But you know that the technology is the work of the most talented humans on earth. And as it rises, and the music plays, you feel the hopes of our species rise with it into the stratosphere.

And then, something goes wrong, and the rocket wobbles out of its proper trajectory, and it begins to fall, venting gas on its way down. Because it is slow-motion, the rocket seems to fall forever, to the sad triplets on the organ. You have been watching it so long at this point that you feel you are the rocket's parent.

Seeing your offspring, your highest aspirations, tumble helplessly back to earth, is strangely heartbreaking. That is what technology, and for that matter, all human endeavor does. It is our glory that we get up every day and give it another shot. Until we die, we try.

As for the Fourth of July, we know that independence arises from the will. The will inside us is what no external tyrant can take from us. It defines all the hope and pathos there is in being human.

We are not guaranteed by our creator to achieve happiness, only that we have the right to pursue it. Every rocket falls to earth, and nobody lives forever, much less happily ever after.

Still, we keep pursuing -- ferociously, illogically, stubbornly. So when you are sitting out on that blanket Sunday night, with the explosions momentarily lighting up the brown cloud of gunpowder hanging in the air, consider what the ruckus is really about. We rise, we fall, and as long as we are able, we rise again.

Against the certainty of ultimate failure, we keep hurling ourselves at our hopes. The hero is you, no matter what day you were born.

Happy Fourth, everybody.

1999

Permutations of n things taken r at a Time

We learn this phrase in algebra.

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

what are the chances for win, place, and show? And so it goes.

Every crossroad contains x possibilities.

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

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

$$_{n}P_{r}=\frac{n!}{(n-r)!}$$

But what if, as happens,

P is an elastic variable?
The mare with the the white flame on her face could come up lame on the second turn, pulling at her straps.

The rider in green could think to himself, What I have really always wanted to do is paint.

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

2012

Can A Poet Lock His Pickup Up?

On the one hand, there should be openness.

The reader should never be stopped from entering the circle.

What then should I say, that the teaching stops here? No one I know throws fistfuls of fives in the air and none of us walks through the airport barenaked.

There is a balance that must be struck.

I do not like people peeing in my truck.

2016

A Concise History of Poetry

In the beginning were the cave artists who marveled at connections with beasts and with the sun.

Then came the Dionysians, who were feverish about wine and the life bubbling around them.

Then it was the time of the scribes, who were literate and wrote down everything God said and did.

Then came the bards who were quite insane but held the clan together with words.

Then the epic poets, who laid out everything for us: gods, heroes and men.

Then the age of idlers kicked in, strumming about their passing pleasures,

the troubadours and their notion of undying love, so long as youth lasts.

Then the Renaissance and the mighty giants strode the earth --

Dante and Chaucer and Libo and Shakespeare.

Then the diplomat poets, writing of their loneliness in the cold mountains.

Then the wits who made it all a mental thing.

And then the romantics who made everything up in their heads.

And then the moderns who showed how disgusting romanticism had become.

And then the postmoderns, who had no actual clue what they were up to.

And then the poets climbing out of the ravines, marveling at the beasts

and the sun that still warmed the world.

2007

Singing To My Dog

Lucy Brown, Lucy Brown
Best dog I have ever found,
Best damn dog in St. Paul town,
Best dog anywhere around!
How I love you sweetest poodle!
How I love you through and throoodle -Good runner! Good chaser!
Good catcher! Fair swimmer ...
Sweetest poodle in the world
Lucy Brown you are my girl
In the clamshell of my life
You are the perfect pearl!

2015

Upon Borrowing Money To Pay Taxes

I wander down to the riverbank where the two great rivers join. It is a drizzly day and my shoes sink into the brown ooze of April like laden canoes. I think of my accountant, pale and eager for the rest she has earned, the long sleep and the margarita suspended above like a salty-eyed angel. I rejoice in her triumph; she is indifferent to my pain. In the river a brown mallard quacks and her mate quacks back, his head and neck as green as the money of the saved, and I wonder why was I born.

The Ridge Road

Robbie let go of the wheel on the turn and Lana sailed like a poodle through a hoop through the windshield, shrinking to a dot, broken limbs propellering into the dark.

The police scraped Robbie together.

He was only able to say, "Where is Lana?"

But the policeman shook his head.

There was no one else in the car, he said.

Robbie woke several times in the hospital and grabbed his brother Larry by the shirt.

She was with me, was all he said, before slipping back into morphine.

Around dawn Larry drove out on the ridge and found the Chevy's skidmarks on the road. He calculated the direction a person would fly if the car pitched headlong into the ditch and set out walking the cornfield rows. Around 9 AM he found her in the stalks, about eighty feet from the point of impact, tangled up, bloodied, open mouth full of dirt. Two months she lay in a coma at home, making intermittent yelps in her dreams, no one sure she was home or had gone. On the 66th day she sat upright and stared goggle-eyed at the casts encasing her. "Oh my gosh," she cried, "what have I done?" "You missed a lot of work," said her dad.

Hard Frost

Late in October, and leaves have been falling for weeks.

My dog and I are walking by the river, by a backwater

wearing a new skin of ice, with white vapor seeping

from the

wounds.

As the sun creeps over the ridge, its rays hit the tops of elms and beech trees, and it is like a chain reaction, the warmth causes leaf after leaf to loosen and fall.

I imagine what it is like in the leaf to be so cold all night and all the softness of the sugar factory is killed, so the sun is like a ray-gun that blasts you from your perch.

So you fall, all at once, as the sun finds more and more of you,

falling all at once like wax soldiers in a failed offensive, falling like soap flakes in an old-time flicker from the Yukon.

And they lay in a heap on the green moist ground like panting dogs

who have been out among trees, chasing all day, and can only

grin now like the agitated dead.

Because the trees are closing shop for the season, they are going away from the green and away from the birds,

the trees are departing for a different place.

They are not dead,

they are only gone, and these branches they leave as remembrances.

Stabbing God's Eyes with BBQ Forks

We had had it and called a meeting.

"He sees what we've been doing. and comes down like a thunderbolt!" said one man.

"The punishment is often disproportionate to the crime,"

cried a woman who suffered from neurofibromatosis and Tourette's.

"Still, maybe he's within his rights," said an old man known for his thoughtfulness,

who was weaving a bird's nest on his lap.

"Sidney, why don't you shut the fuck up!" people cried in unison.

Eventually we chose a champion, named Nomar, and handed him two long-handled silver BBQ forks.

The plan was to plunge the forks into God's eyes

while he was surveying all he had wrought, as was his wont.

Nomar lay in wait while God adjusted his instrumentation.

Then, stepping from the drapes, Nomar struck, embedding the BBQ forks deep into God's eye sockets.

The eyeballs popped out, making a champagne cork sound.

"My word!" said the Lord God, wrenching the utensils out with his fists

and weeping bloody tears.

"Things will never be the same," he said, his eyes wrapped in a checkered sash.

"You know, I did a lot of good stuff, too," he said to no one in particular.

"They ought to give me credit for that at least. Birds and babies and such."

Nomar was unnerved by what he had done. "Let's move on," he said anxiously.

"But I will say, seeing you like this, that we perhaps didn't appreciate your totality."

"Don't blame yourself," God murmured. "You had just cause."

But Nomar could not help himself. An enormous sense of guilt washed over him.

"My friends made me do this," he said, thumping his breast. "What jerks they all are!"

"I know," God said, staring off into space. "I know."

2010

What The Goldfish Wants To Know

Lips pursed, the fish in the bowl stares goggle-eyed at its walls.

It lets out a perfect bubble, inside which is nested a single syllable, which asks a simple question --

Why?

1994

l'Envoi

This is what I commend to you, make good use of the brick-in-hand. Useful learning weighted by wood pulp -that's its meaning No one wants to be a joke like the undug potato or the celery stalk. But here is evidence of a crime, my darling DNA, I pray somebody finds Who stole the baloney that hanged curled in the balcony. How I miss that dear old bird -my one chance ever to also be cured.

2007

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.

The Woman in Seat 20C

Sometimes in the periphery of the eye you see one.
Someone who knows the way that things are.
You know them by the rings around

their eyes -paranoid, hostile,

broken-hearted,

they are the experts

on the way
things are.
You want to cup
her cheek in
your palm
and say I know,
I know, isn't
it awful.

2010

Perspective

a thread.

There are no fields between the plane and the ground below.

The farmlands look like Band-Aids, and the little car
On the long skinny highway down there looks foolproof
As a bead on an abacus wire, undeviating as a button on

Actually, someone full-sized is inside, and he has to steer

Or he'll go in the ditch. He could hit his head.

Or worse, miss his appointment in a room up ahead in one of the buildings alongside the road.

1974

Campaign

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

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

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

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

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

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

1974

From Poems Whose Titles Come After, #14

The most important element to a successful poem?
Why, it's you, of course.

Title: 'Sucking Up to the Reader'

from 'Poems Whose Titles Come After.' #9

Knock-knock ...

Leave me alone!

Title: "Depressing Knock Knock Joke"

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

Earn Your Children's Attention

When they are thirteen sign them up for the Mars mission.
Then call them every three weeks on the radio.
They will be so glad to hear from you.

The Gladhand

He recognizes me but can't summon my name.

Hey, how ya doin, he says grandly,

putting his hand on my shoulder,

like we had been best friends as boys.

You know, he says, I was very impressed with the thing you did on suicide.

I look up. He has read about my daughter?

He snaps his fingers. I forget the guy's name, he says.

The suicide guy. Come on, help me!

My mind goes blank. I wrote about someone else's suicide?

You know, he says, the fellow out on the prairie!

Ah, I say. My old editor, Gruchow.

Something I had written seven years before.

I mean, you really nailed it, the man goes on.

The psychology, the depression, the impression he made on people.

It's a shame, and it's an area we have to do more about --

as if he were in charge of society's agenda.

He was a friend, I say, a sort of one anyway.

It's really the issue of our time, isn't it, the man says.

You did a super job, you should write more,

as if I had not written my heart out on this sickening sad topic.

I thank him for the compliment, as he skates down the aisle to shake other hands, and to cause them similar pain.

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

The Beagles Of Arkansas

The crash through the bramble at night resounds in the scraggly hills,

And well in the wake of every foreign license plate

A yapping head and a tumult of eyes plead to be adopted and taken away.

Scorpions crane their tails to you, peacocks explode for passing cars,

mud daubers chew hasty cabins on rear-view mirrors.

Everything seems to want out, yet it stays,

prisoners of the nonunion wage.

.

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.

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

Big Chord

Conservatory types are unable to like it.

It is too wild, too harsh, like Transatlantic cables strung from the skins of a thousand lions,

stretched across a drum that is miles across.

And when it is sawed on it is more than your radio can tell you,

it is more than a loud cry or that choir that you made cry,

it is a scraping, shuddering sound that sets everything oscillating,

it is a moan rising up from the bladder of the earth,

it makes everything spin in the slowest and most excruciating motion,

it is frightening and yet you feel called to approach it, limply,

because it brooks no resistance, it accepts no excuses, it gathers us under its monstrous wing.

2011

New York City

It was the winter of 1980. I took a late night train from New Haven, arriving around 5 am, and wandered over to Central Park.

It was a crisp morning, with frost on the sidewalks and grass.

I sat on a stone bench by a stone wall, took out my notebook, and began scribbling thoughts from the train.

Suddenly, a giant pneumatic tube uncoiled in front of me

and blasted me with warm, stinky gas.

It was the bristled trunk of an elephant, standing just inside the wall. I had chosen a bench at the zoo.

My head and shoulders were dampened by the blast.

The trunk retracted, left me sitting there, with the smell of sour hay, rotten cane, and the mucous tissues of a giant land mammal.

2003

You Taught Me How to Die

The dog was in a coma when we arrived at the hospital.

I lifted him, limp, from the carseat and placed him on the cart.

They took him inside to examine him, then wheeled him back out to me,

ready for the injection. My son and I knelt around him for a few minutes,

thanking him with words and touches for being a good dog,

and for being our dog his entire life. Just before it was time,

he opened his eyes, which were so blind now, and so tired from his ordeal.

Then he licked the knuckles on our hands, so solemnly, then drifted back to sleep.

* * *

Know that I loved you every day of my life,
the life we shared together, the children we had,
the travels we took and the joy we had.
It was you who gave all this to me.

It was you, and don't think I don't know this.

2010

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

I Fall In Love Too Easily

Often, over a counter in a store -Suddenly I get a glimpse of your consciousness -bright, generous, and eager to laugh -rubbing up against my consciousness -your wonderful point of view
smacking just for a moment against my point of view -like suns colliding -touching off significant ramifications -and I walk out into the street indifferent to traffic -heart singing, eyes spinning, spine quaking --

and I go home and write a score of poems

on the feeling I am having -rich, ebullient, overcome with love -feeling every possible emotion, including
safety, knowing no one will ever know.

2016

The Sign In The Flaming Store Window

When you say you can't imagine I know exactly what you mean --

you mean it hurts to imagine, and who needs that unnecessary pain

when there is enough of the real stuff to go around.

The truth is we imagine all the time of course and as bad as this is

we imagine much worse. If you couldn't imagine you wouldn't be afraid.

The truth is we are losers, we will lose everything we have and everything we know,

each lovely face will crumple in the flame and if we don't see it

it's only because our face caught fire first, but someone saw

and so someone's heart must break.

We knew what the deal was when we signed on.

Everything must go, that's what the sign in the store window says.

The shelves will be stripped and the roof set ablaze, and every thing inside be swallowed in the roar.

It's no good to walk the white chalk line, bereft, mumbling,

tearing at our hair and clothes, no one can live for a week like that.

But it's not a bad thing to pack it away in the back of our mind,

closeout, clearance, make us an offer!

The other creatures, rooted in the earth or yawning in the grass,

they don't have to deal with this.

Next time life seems pointless, next time you want to watch it shoot out of the can,

remember that fact: Why would this excruciation occur, why are you able

to imagine this and so much more, until every tear sizzles

to a salty nothing, if you meant nothing?

Brother, if your heart doesn't break ... you're not here.

2014

https://inbetweenhangovers.wordpress.com/2016/07/02/the -sign-in-the-flaming-store-window-by-mike-finley/

A Demon Lives Inside Of Me ...

By a woodstove DEEP inside my ear ...`

A demon the size of a toenail, I guess -But a fully functioning demon nonetheless.

For years I had no notion he was there, until one day he woke me in my chair.

"I am the demon Odorono," he said,

"and for my own personal use and convenience I have confiscated your head."

"But you have no right," I cried, blinking.

"I need this head to do my thinking!"

"You think those thoughts are yours?" he mocked.

"They're just the smell from my unwashed socks."

Then the demon tapped my eardrum with a stick, and filled my ear with crazy static.

The blast of a freighter piercing the fog.

The clang of iron, bark of dog.

The screams of monkeys high in the canopy.

The grand finale fireworks explode, spray-painting my brain-pan, with silver and gold.

Then the demon grabbed my auditory nerve in both hands and he chomped on it and chomped on it and chomped on it again —

And I heard my hearing start to fade.

Not the noise and tinnitus he made,
but I could no longer hear any of you, sweet friends.

I saw you smacking your lips but making no sense. No communication, no coherence.

It was the saddest thing,

Trying to connect but getting nothing.

Then I had my silent epiphany:
"We strive in a world we cannot control."
and isn't that our glory, after all?

I chronicled this insight in a mighty poem,
"We strive in a world we cannot control."

If truth was a weapon, then here was my ball-peen hammer!

Luckily, The New Yorker Magazine suspended its customary high standards.

And mailed me a check for \$35.

I was the toast of East Coast scholars.

The issue was a hit and sold out in two days.

I became famous by this critic's phrase:

"The unhearing poet who heard OUR cry.

And wrote it down in a brave lullabye."

My old professor from UCLA,
who could never see his way to give me an A,
Sought me out and shouted to me,
"Your work has made a giant leap," said he,
"You know who you are now, you have been set free."

But his approval fell on deaf ears.

I needed to confront the demon upstairs.

I knocked on my head, knowing it would jolt him out of bed. There is a new sheriff now enforcing a brand new rule: "We Strive in a World We Cannot Control!!"

So why not hit the road, a-hole?"

The demon leaped from his nightstand, a tiny green suitcase in one hand.

Before he spread his wings to fly,
I heard him say two words:

"Bye" and "bye."

That's right, I heard him say the words!
I heard it with my own two ears!

So now my head is mine again.

Demon free, till who knows when.

Best of all, now I am known as
"The Poet Who Listens" -Thank you, dear friends, for your kind assistance!!

God And Hippopotamus

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

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

God thought deeply on the matter;

Finally he said Oh, all right, Just don't eat all the fish.

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

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

See? she says, her billiard-ball eyes Rolling upward to the moon --No scales!

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.

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.

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

[&]quot;I will change."

Walking With a Friend By the River in Winter

Sometimes it's good to shut up and keep trudging the snowy path.

The dogs chase one another in an ecstasy of play.

The trains below shudder as the freight cars connect.

Because we are not talking we see a young bald eagle careen overhead on the branch of a cottonwood.

We did not see at first he had a fresh-killed pigeon in his talons. Now, just a few feet above us in the tree he plucks the feathers from the body tuft by tuft and they fall like snow, they fall with the snow, blood-wet feathers fall peacefully to the frozen ground.

Old Strip Mall, Lorain

Called Miracle Mile when it was platted out in the 50s, boasted two groceries, Fisher-Fazio at one end and Kroger's at the other.

In their heyday their parking lots were fresh black with brilliant yellow striping,

And cars filled every space all the way to the road.

Two wealthy houses at war in the same part of town And the boxboys fought over whose cart was whose.

Now the weeds grow through the gray cracks. Fisher-Fazio is a bingo hall on Thursday nights and plywood covers every Kroger window,

where there was some kind of fire.

The only store still open is a dollar bargain store
Renamed the 88 cent store to give it an edge.
The competition over, the two old rivals
Sit toothless on their slabs, watching a single sheet

of newspaper drift across the lot.

(1986)

Anima

En route to our rendezvous I am handed a lit stick of dynamite

and being polite I do not refuse.

With blackend face and smoldering collar I proceed, failing to notice the two-ton safe dropping from a fifth story window.

Though badly accordioned I make my way to you despite stepping on rakes that batter my face, despite steam rollers ironing me flat, despite electrical shocks making a swastika of me in the air.

So many efforts made to keep me from you -the locomotive rushing from the hastily painted tunnel,
me poised for eons over the manhole hole before
falling,

the wet cement awaiting me below is hardening. But do not doubt, my soul, my heart, that I will be with you in due time.

1979

I Wanted My Father To Know Me Better

I rented a video on VHS, Zorba the Greek.

Black and white movie about an Englishman learning lust of life from Anthony Quinn.

My dad sits through half an hour of it to refill his drink.

"I'm not getting it," he says.

I brought out some records, including 12-string guitarist John Fahey's "The Yellow Princess," a jangly, wonderful album of complex picking.

"Sounds like he's playing his guitar with an eggbeater," my dad says.

I remember him saying, over vodka and Fresca, "I'm open minded, I'd try pot some time, just to see what all the hullabaloo's about."

The next night I hand him a rolled joint. "You said," I remind him. He looks at me, aghast. "Are you out of your fucking mind?"

Two Fathers, Two Sons

My dad and I have lunch in Ventura. Halfway home, he realizes he is missing his wallet.

"Sons of bitches," he says, pounding on the wheel. "Robbing sons of bitches."

At home in Inglewood, a phone call. "Mister Finley?" a kid says. "I found your wallet in a parking lot. I called the number inside."

"Any money in it?" "Yes, forty dollars." "A Mastercard?"

"Yes. My dad is driving me to a game at the Forum at seven. We can bring it right to you."

"Ha ha," my dad says, hanging up. "Am I one lucky SOB!"

An hour later, a knock on the door. Kid hands over the wallet.

"That's great, kid," my dad says, and shuts the door in his face. "It's all there," he says, waving the wallet at us.

Another knock. My dad opens the door. The kid's dad is standing there.

"You ever hear of rewards?" the man asks, and punches my dad in the nose. "That's yours."

Poems Whose Titles Come After, #3

If everyone was the same we would all have to die because there is just not much demand for that guy.

Title: "On Diversity"

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

The Cherry Tree By Du Fu's Cabin

This 1975 poem stands out for me. I had just read Arthur Waley's Translations from the Chinese, and this came out of that. I think it is the first sincere thing I ever wrote. Everything before this was angry or attentiongetting or political or stoned or horny or surrealistic or just plain nuts. I don't think it's great, but for me it was an valuable new direction.

I watched you when my boughs hung low, bending with their weight.

My harvest was the season's wear, bitter as blue crab apples.

You passed by me, still and soft in black rains.

Trickles were cool tears, and mine

was the joy of ten thousand blossoms as white as May.

From these weathered sticks I have spared one branch.

One day, it will fly true as a zen arrow.

1975

Tim Hoolihan's Wake

Three days Tim waited to let out gas.

Then it came, endlessly bubbling out of him, like a machine gun firing into honey.

His widow smiled thinly.

Mighty Poem

There is a paradox in English, that some words mean the opposite of themselves.

Thus *sanction* can mean ether permission or impermission.

Now, one of our commonest words, *might*, can mean raw power, almost beyond measure,

the might of the hydroelectric dam, the might of God, the might of Mighty Mouse,

and on the other hand it is the subjunctive form of the verb may, meaning it's possible,

conceivable, it could go either way:

Looks like it *might* rain; I *might* go to the dance with you;

a locomotive *might* be a speeding hound, or it *might* not.

You can feel the power leaking out of that form.

The subjunctive maybe – it doesn't get less mighty than that.

And most poets take refuge in the maybe -- I *might* change my life.

There *might* be a God. A man *might* dream, who knows.

Poets are pussies, it's a well-known fact.

We languish daytimes on our sofas in our blouses and blue silk stockings,

chewing our hangnails, play Mother Might I and order out.

We are like oil paintings of sad clowns with bleared greasepaint

that normal people can't look at long because it causes confused feelings.

And when we fight we are like women slapping because we are afraid to land a punch.

We think about flowers and our dead grandmothers and maybe we suck on our thumbs.

When are we going to fight like men?

When will we challenge ourselves not to be more sensitive

or to bear greater pain or to honor the past but to advance a proposition

and make it stick? Why are we so miserable and insecure and envious?

Who cares what fucking Frank got from the Carnegie Mellon Fund?

Why aren't we being obvious, and sentimental, and funny?

Why aren't we getting drunk and falling down the stairs?

Why are so few poems about ballgames and tits when those are what we love?

Why aren't love poems gushing out of us like springwater from a stone?

Why aren't we thanking our mothers and fathers?

We should be endorsing candidates and christening bridges and honoring the dead.

We shouldn't be going over anyone's head, including our own.

We should be clear as champagne and twice as fun.

A mighty poem is not a maybe poem.

It flows like rushing water to the sea.

A mighty poem is for everyone.

It tolls for you as well as tolls for me.

A mighty poem burns calories and works on

you until you have to stop and breathe.

A mighty poem is willing to pay the cost.

It says to you, get furious, or lost.

2011

My Old Man

Rachel was driving through Southern California in 1978, and stopped by my father's place in Hesperia to introduce herself. He invited her in, and fed her, and was reasonably hospitable.

But at one point my dad looked at her and said, "You remind me of that movie star ... what's the name though .. the one with the red hair ...?"

Feeling complimented, Rachel ran through her list of ravishing Hollywood redheads.

"Lucille Ball?" ... so funny!

"Rita Hayworth?" ... not too shabby ...

"Katherine Hepburn?" Why that would be ecstasy ...

But no to any one of those.

"I've got it." My dad said. "Woody Allen."

And what woman, meeting her future father-in-law, whom she will have to deal with for the next thirty years, doesn't want to be compared physically to Woody Allen?

Cup of Old Pens

It's not that the pens are crap, although many are – who has nice pens any more?

It's not that I wrote so furiously with them, and bled out all the ink that coursed through them.

It's that they are old now, twenty, thirty years lying in the drawer with the rusty paperclips and shredded rubber bands,

whatever dreams they might have dreamed turning to scab in their sleeves.

Success

I always looked at prospective girlfriends and asked –
Is this one going to last? And if she lasts, what will happen to her?

I noticed the adults in town were not so great-looking.

And even though the girls I knew looked terrific at the moment,

I knew that that might change.

So I was on the lookout for a girl who would not crumble or fade,

a girl who would not go soft in the firm nice places, or firm in the nice soft ones.

Then I met Rachel, who had the sturdy nature I had been searching for.

When first we lay together, that I said to her, "You have a pleasing density."

She scoffed. You scoff. Everyone likes a good scoff, don't they?

But I will tell you, when we check into a hotel,
the clerk always makes a point of asking her,
"Will you be needing a separate bed for your father?"

2001

The Clarinet Is a Difficult Instrument

I was eating minestrone when I heard something fall outside my apartment window.

Too dark to see much but a pair of hairy arms slam shut a window on the third floor of the building opposite mine.

In the morning all I found was a bent clarinet on cement,

dented horn and pawn shop sticker saying nine dollars.

It reminded me of the French explorer Antoine de la Mothe Cadillac.

He too had dreams, set sail up the St. Lawrence, looking for China,

and wound up settling in Detroit instead.

1976

We Think We Invented Wondering

We think we invented wondering,
but that may not be true.

All these things buzzing around us -what if wondering is all they do?

Wide-eyed, zigging, zagging, eating —
all of it a query that is never resolved -an unbegun sentence that hangs in the air -that being the business of being, without the extra ado.

2005

On Having My First Hearing Aid Implanted

I hear ...

my breath like an athlete drawing strength for the next heat ...

the murmur of the exhaust fan reaching out to me from a duct ...

the thud of the windshield blades dragged across ice...

a new sound from an old CD, a liquid throb of accordion

•••

the squeak of the snow-pack as I step toward the door

. . .

the gasp of the apple surrendering to the knife

2003

Death and Contracts

The law does not know what to do when someone dies.

All the agreements, all the debts a person entered into go up in the smoke and the sparks of their dying.

Landlords with suicides tear up their leases.

Creditors try to go after the relatives of debtors who die,

because if you can scare just one surviving family member into paying,

that's good.

But mainly nothing works and creditors

are left to snap their fingers,

because another deadbeat has pulled a fast one.

I'm Glad I Don't Have Bird Feet

It would be so hard to put socks on.

2013

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

The Upset Sea

Weather reports said it would get heavy but it still came on fast.

By noon the sea was rolling,

10 foot swells that pitched the boat repeatedly into the next wall of water,

forcing people to huddle in the cabin and glance about with worried expressions.

The newlywed couple in front of us were sick

she lovely in he face and eyes,
he a little drunk and full from two too many
iced breakfast rolls.

So when he barfed all over her, the pitch of the boat was such that it dripped down off her and onto the pitching floor, including my backpack beside her, until it was swimming in chowder and the people stared at it slipping to and fro with horrified expressions.

Meanwhile the boat was rocking and rolling and I was torn mentally between thoughts of the craft's capsizing and thoughts that that might rinse the backpack clean. A small young woman from the excursion company stepped forward, miraculously able to right herself, and began to press the woman with paper napkins,' the brown nonabsorbent kind you find in lavatories. The junior ship's officer knelt like Magdalene in the typhoon tp daub the shaken woman's sweater and jeans, then led the two back to the bow where the pitching was minimal. She staggered back to see if I wanted to empty the pack and she would hose it down. Ashamed by her graciousness, I nodded. She offered me gloves but I said no, I was once a dad and waded through worse than this. The boat continued to pitch and yaw and the newlywed woman returned, boyfriendless, to stare sullenly out the window.

But when we ducked back into the inlet, away from he raging sea, she rose and rejoined him at the gangplank, where they kissed and smiled, but they stayed stationed for a getaway, wanting to face people no more. "I want to thank you for your positive attitude," said the brave young boatswain, who I wanted as a daughter. "And you for your great courtesy," I replied, sorry I would never see her again. And as Rachel and I walked safely ashore, I lifted the backpack to smell. It was all there, my computer, my wallet, my cellphone, my journal, my books, and mixed in with it all, the sea itself, plus the smell of some guy's stomach juices, plus the faintest hint of cinnamon.

Penn Station

Passengers hug their luggage close,
their faces diagonal with dismay,
and check their watches as they wait
by the message board
for news of the delayed train.
One women clasps her red gloves and keys in one hand.
A professional man folds his arms and frowns.
A student gazes up at the board with open mouth.
Then the letters start flipping and
the speakers announce that the train

to Princeton Junction is cleared for boarding and everyone breaks for the steps down to Track One, clambering down like a centipede in a suit. Once situated in our seats, we look up, out, and away as the conductor announces that a bridge in Newark is causing problems and there will be an indefinite delay. A groan goes through the car like an infantry taking fire. Jesus Christ, mutters the professional man, who looks like he is about to cry, and who obviously has someplace important to get to. He and the woman in red gloves and half a dozen others bolt to their feet, grab their bags and rush back up the stairs to catch a ride on another line. No sooner are they gone than the address system announces

that the problems in Newark have been resolved, and the car begins to slide forward in the station. I ask the conductor if we couldn't call the people back, and end their suffering. The man just punches my ticket, smiles and says,

Great Stuff

"You're going to be just fine."

There is a crunching sound under the kitchen floor,

you imagine it's a mouse that came in from the cold and is having its way with your circuitry and beams.

You check the limestone foundation of your home and see numerous holes

in the porous rock a creature could use as a way to get in.

So you go to Menard's and find a product in the paint section.

Great Stuff is what it says on the can, it's an aerosol foam sealant.

You attach a kind of straw to the can to direct the flow, hold the can upside down,

squeeze the trigger on the can, then release the foam into the cracks between things

and it expands to form a yellowish dam that swells and hardens to keep things in or out.

You expect the foam to be like shaving cream, light and inoffensive,

but as soon as you pull the trigger the foam oozes out, and it is nasty sticky,

it does not go where you want it to go, it tumbles end over end

down the limestone wall like bloated snakes.

You want it to squirt exactly into the chink you see in the wall and stay there,

but the snake says fuck that, I'll go where I want to go.

That's when you see that Great Stuff comes from Dow, the good people who brought you napalm.

You think, well, I'm still in charge here, I'll use my fingers to sculpt the contours,

it will be like drawing a bead with window putty, but the moment you come in contact

with the foam you regret it, it is astonishingly sticky, in a sickening, greasy sort of way,

your fingers cry out that this was not such a hot idea, and you hold up your hands in horror,

trying to scrape the gunk from one hand with the nails of the other,

and you know in an instant this substance is going to be on you all week.

In the end you arrive at a truce with the foam.

It fills the holes, then goes where it will, swelling, blobbing, tumbling down the wall,

so that when it dries it looks like your house has a cold and these hideous boogers are weeping through the cracks,

and you stand there, hands blackened by the greasy glue,

you cannot touch anything for days, or eat, but the holes are filled,

the mouse will beat on the dam you have made with its tiny fists.

I sought refuge from the wild in this house of infinite food, he will say,

and now it is my fate to starve behind this hopeless, sealed-up wall.

And you can accept that, gothic as it is, because you have filled

the holes that let things in to the place where the family you love

sleeps in their beds with their adorable risings and fallings,

alive and unprotected, and unaware of all the great stuff you do.

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.

The Woman On Level 5-North

The young woman in accounting is talking to a colleague,

and she is paying close attention to what the other is saying.

And it is this quality of attention that strikes you as great.

She is a girl with no apparent power in the world and yet she is hanging in there, giving full ear in this moment to her friend.

You could fall in love with a woman like this

and almost immediately be dissatisfied.

What does she know, after all -her beauty and her sincerity arise from innocence,
her not knowing.

It is illogical what she throws up against the world, the accident of her beauty, the fact that nothing has dragged her down yet, nothing has dulled the earnest light in her eyes.

And so you marry her and the business of chopping her down like a tree begins because that is what men do, and it is what women do, too.

But there is always the possibility that you may find her to be made of the same bright steel you see right now, fearless and intent, listening and respectful, and she will light your way and be a blessing to you

every hour and every minute till you draw your last breath

Eat Up, Moth

You like it so much,
I'm prepared to sit here
till you finish
the entire sweater.

1968

Filling out his Conscientious Objector form,

he came to this question:

Do you advocate the overthrow of the United States Government

by force or violence?

And after some deliberation wrote down,

force.

1971

Little Bighorn

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

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

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

A Lesson to the Death's Head Regiment of Hussars, 1911

Gentlemen --

I hear the way you are laughing in the beer halls and wherever

and I do not like it at all.

It pains me to hear you reduced to sniggers, titters or guffaws.

There is one and only one way a German officer can properly laugh:

short, sharp and manly. Like this: "Ha!"

Did you hear how I did that? "Ha!", Now repeat after me: "Ha! Ha!"

This is how we are to laugh from this point forward.

No other form of laughing will be tolerated.

Now I want to hear you say it that way. Come now:

One, two three, "Ha!"

Come along there, you can do better than that.

I want you to shout it lustily, and with explosive, masculine mirth.

Once your mirth is expressed -- be done with it.

Do not reflect endlessly on the object of your amusement.

Remember that you are German officers.

Siege

An army has been gathering over the years with one intention, to oppose me at every turn.

They drew from the ranks of the insulted, the overlooked and the spurned.

All night every night I hear them marching, drilling in formation, the click of rifles, the smoke of many fires.

I provoke them from the ramparts.

"Come and get me!" I cry.

But their tactic is to crush me

by paying no attention

whatsoever.

Compounding Interest

If you can set aside a small sum,

Even as little as five dollars a week,

And you invest it in an interest-bearing account,

And you keep adding to it week after week without fail,

After thirty years you will be amazed

How little you have saved.

I'm Glad I Don't Have Bird's Feet

It would be so hard to put socks on.

Aerosol Tears

for today's sad person on the go

from 'Poems Whose Titles Come After.' No. 5

The sucking sound
At the end of the milkshake

Title: "Death"

Rx for Happiness

Admire your daylilies dailily.

How Good Of A Guy Was He?

He worried that the flesh-eating bacteria were not getting enough.

From 'Poems Whose Titles Come After,' #8

He seemed a cheery soul with his stovepipe hat and corncob pipe, standing on the terrace on Ashland Avenue, until you saw his eyes and mouth were made from frozen sticks of dog poop.

Title: 'The Abominable Snowman'

The Woman I Love

The woman I love is much smarter than me, therefore my life with her is one long lookout. Where will she turn up next? I never know.

You sometimes see me peering deep into my binoculars, scanning the horizon. And then she will be there, tapping my shoulder from behind.

You would think I would learn, but I don't. Idiotically, I still walk down the street whistling a tune or kicking a can, imagining I weren't under constant surveillance. Imaging every eye behind every drape was not hers.

Sometimes I congratulate myself, saying I did it, I made good my escape. And I run to a place that she will never in a hundred years find.

But when I get there the signs are everywhere -- the bedsheets twisted just so, the dried drop of wine on the floor. I warn the natives she is coming and they smile and nod at me. Everyone knows her name.

She says I'll never learn. I say I will when I'm good and ready.

That one time, in the delta, I was ready, poised to exterminate, but I weakened at the last second and felt pity, and put two bits in her tin cup. I figured, she's blind. She's got a monkey to feed. And with that accordion playing of hers she could not be grossing much.

And she whipped off her black glasses and I tumbled down into her eyes, screaming and waving my arms, falling like a stone, like a bucket down a well.

When I righted myself I still saw her eyes. Laughing, she bit me on the wrist and took off after me, chasing me up and down the French Quarter, over and through the cast iron rails. At the last possible moment I was able to disguise myself as a bishop in an innocent game of chess.

I nearly burst with laughter as she dashed by, teeth dripping with desire. Otherwise, she would be mine today.

You see, though she is insanely clever, I am no slouch myself.

When I was just a boy and she was my teacher I fooled her routinely. The other nine year olds hated me -- the mustache, I think -- and because I got special favors from teacher.

One day she demanded I stay after and wash her blackboard and I soaked and rubbed, smeared and stroked. She said don't stop but I stopped.

The look on that schoolmarm face! When I told her I had to "go," I had to tear the corridor pass from her clutching fingers. I gave her the slip and fled through the swingsets.

There was a supermarket in the Sandwich Islands. Everyone wore grass skirts -- checkouts, boxboys, men with cleavers and bloodied aprons.

I filled my cart with a sense of being stricken. Behind a jam jar I saw a seething eyelid. I uncovered another

eye, a flaring nostril, an iron ring, a single horn of matted hair extruding from a troubled brow.

She bellowed!

Customers spilled milk and burst into tears. The holy cow of Kauai bolted from the bins. There was a terrible rustling of skirts.

I hid in the grass for forever, and when the moment was right melted into the crowd.

No need to explain it. This is not an allegory. It's her. She changes. I wasn't surprised in 1936 in Berlin when I looked behind me and she was there. I was Jesse Owens and she was Frau Cosima, an ideological gleam in her eye. She reached for my baton but I broke for the finish.

All this time I was madly in love. Here was a woman who knew about a man. The things he needs. The things he needs to need. How delicate we are like pale flowers struggling in a soft breeze. How when we say no we mean yes, yes.

You appreciate that when you are up the Amazon without a paddle. She was so gentle. I was in a tree, with a sloth and a parrot. I was yellow and had little sharp teeth and black spots. She was very white and very tall and had a Mauser rifle and two trained crocodiles.

How my jeweled eyes lit up the night. And the pounding of my heart found its place between her cross-hairs.

But she knew I was not ready and let me off easy. The bullet only grazed me. I was up all night, yowling and licking the soft wound.

I am at a party high over New York. It's George Plimpton's house. He says he is writing a book about what it is like, just for a day, to impersonate a human being.

Someone says something, four score of eyebrows arch.

Across a battery of stemware I spot her. Escape, escape, and there is no escape. Then I remembered. The Empire State Building is like the moon -- its dark side has never been seen. I look out the window -- one hundred floors of continuous fire escape.

Closing my eyes I begin my descent. Luck is with me -- I beat the elevator down.

She chases me across the Yukon carrying a sling of baby sons in one hand, a foreclosed mortgage in the other. Tweaking my sinister mustache, I weep.

When I look over my shoulder she has become a ravening wolf, bounding after me, snapping at my heels.

I hippity hop across Alaska and dive into the Bering Sea. She is equally vivid as a shark. Crawling onto dry land I take cover as she strafes me as a fighter plane from unbelievably low altitudes.

I make my way across the Sahara, panting. A dozen dunes away I hear the drone of the jeep of the woman I love. But when I peek she isn't a jeep at all. She's a mosquito the size of a jeep, something completely different.

I turn into a billiard ball and burrow into the desert sand. Foiled, she buzzes off.

I spend forty days in the desert. I am religious as cactus, pared down to the least, holiest thing. Then I hear it.

One thousand saxophones bopping martially under the midday sun! Climbing my outpost I look down as legion upon legion pass below me blowing hot jazz.

And at their head is Octavian, and this time she means business.

Fortunately my disciples had prepared for such an eventuality. I climb through a trap door in the desert and emerge at the corner of Fifth and Wabasha in downtown St. Paul. It is never far from St. Paul to the desert.

I brush the sand from my jeans and board the 21A. The driver's eyes meet mine in the mirror, but I am exhausted, I collapse in the last seat. Those eyes, I wonder, where have I seen those eyes before. Like happy dragons, ready to dine. I will see them in my dreams as I see them now, and forever.

Gust

The weather is changing.
The coat hangers jangle softly in the dark.

Item

An anarchist organization claimed responsibility for a break-in at, of all places, the South Side's 47th precinct police station late Sarurday evening.

Nothing was stolen, nothing was broken, except the vandals entered the bathroom area on the first floor and made off with every single one of eighteen horseshoe toilet seats.

Investigators say they have nothing to go on.

Gruchow on The Overbreeding of the Broad Breasted White, with an Aside About Nelson Rockefeller

Is it true what they say about turkeys drowning in rain? I have seen the birds look up when it starts to rain, he says. It is

like they are uncertain what rain is.

If it is a heavy rain, you may find a few dead in the morning.

If it is a gulley-washer, it will look like a massacre took place.

That's in the summer. I saw worse in winter.

The farmer puts light bulbs in the coops, to keep the birds from

freezing. The birds crowd around for warmth. One or two will be

actually touching the hot glass, and will burn and die.

remaining birds then climb under the dead ones to get closer to

the heat. Then they suffocate or burn.

On a really cold night, as many as a hundred desperate birds will

force their way under the dead to take their place against the

bulb.

In the morning, the farmer finds his work of a year frozen in a

heap.

Paul told me he had the worst job any man ever had – turkey

desemenation, at a farm near Montevideo.

Does that mean --?

Yes, Paul says. You sit them in your lap, and you jack them off.

Using a machine?

We didn't have one.

Just your fingers?

Just my fingers.

They let you do that?

They look forward to it, Mike, like a soldier in a whorehouse.

Did you wear gloves?

Yes.

What did they do?

Stared off into space mostly. A few looked at me – thankfully I

guess.

Tell me about Nelson Rockefeller.

It was 1970. Governor Rockefeller was invited to be grand

marshal of the Turkey Day Parade down Main Street. Everyone told him not to, but he insisted on wearing a long

hounds-tooth overcoat as he rode through in his limo.

He had it

in his head that Minnesota was a cold place, even though this

was early September.

One guy, standing on the curb in front of the courthouse, took

one look at the overdressed governor and said, "I'm glad I didn't

vote for that turkey."

The Gall

The oak tree has a gall around its trunk, the exception to its perfect upright lines that makes the tree look pregnant and suggests a shortened life. But what does a tree know. Water is drawn, sugar is distributed, leaves splay themselves in the sun like stewardesses on layoff. Photosynthesis wants no more and the effect of a cancer at the waistline, a tumor of wood throwing everything off, is nil. The game goes on, the process proceeds despite deformity, despite circuitousness through cambium, xylem, and phloem.

At The Bulkhead

We asked the driver, just across from us, if he ever thought about the danger of all those miles rolled up, the sleepy eyes, the open road, the oncoming cars.

He laughed and said,

"No, I'm at peace with all that," and adjusted his visor.

And you and I looked at one another, wishing we had not asked.

The Light

I talked about it, and talked about it, and now I'm afraid to look at it.

It was supposed to be visible a long way off.

Supposed to be outside, but I could take it inside.

Though it came at the end of a long, bitter year, and many dry miles of traveling, it would be perfect.

And here it is, of all seasons, summer.

It comes and it's not what I thought it would be.

From the veranda of my mother's house in Ohio -- fireflies.

I know what will happen.

In the end I will congratulate myself, saying:

I knew it. I knew it.

But no one else could see it.

There Are Bargains If You Look

Thanks to our men and women in uniform the price of gas is way down.

You can buy health insurance today for a dollar a week.

It is possible to grow one's penis to remarkable length.

Powerball has reached a \$430 million payout.

Lose weight easily the five grapefruits a day way.

In a shaky economy, with the world in the balance, you can never pay too much for gold.

For spending money, always borrow against your home.

The Dead And Dying Forest

Uncertain what happened here -- a virus borne by floodwaters?

But the trees look sick now,
their scraggly bark and broken limbs,
skinned trunks and exposed roots.

Many have collapsed into the arms
of their comrades, those
who stood placidly alongside them for years,
now touching, now embracing,
now supporting one another in their final hours.

They gaze sorrowfully at the river unfolding above,
And them now gasping like helpless beggars
Holding out frail hands -Won't you help us make the climb down?

Irish Weeds ~ A Found Poem

From an An Dang tour guide's brochure, 2004

A weed is a plant in the wrong place.

It is also an attitude of mind.

Every garden plant has its origins in the wild, when plants were properly respected for their powers.

Dock and bramble, nettle and plantain were always part of the garden.

Cocksfoot is the stateliest of grasses in flower,

its spiky panicle smothered in anthers of pale purple.

It is also the right weed to chew, for the sugar stored deep at the base of the stem.

Other weeds are for touching: soft cats' tails of timothy, the pink and feathery plumes of Yorkshire fog.

Dandelion, too: its French name, pissenlit, a tribute to the plant's powers

as a diuretic, is straightforwardly echoed in the English vernacular -- "pissy-bed."

Dandelions grow in a hedge bank community along with primroses, violets, and celandines.

Above them, common vetch twines in summer cries of amethyst and bright blue.

And if the downy cranesbill should edge its pink stars into the sea kale,

won't they be most welcome there?

Is it any less beautiful scrambling among the peas?

2003

Migration of the Harriers

In November the sky grows dark at their approach, the harriers, seeking nourishment.

Wingspreads reaching eighteen feet across,

blot out the light, as jagged shadows race across cornfields,

skittish cattle form impromptu stampedes,

fearful of the great birds snatching their young for a snack en route to Texas.

The harriers take what they want, when they want it.

A convenience store in Claiborne, Missouri, videotaped a band of a dozen shattering the plate glass and rampaging

through the aisles, tearing open cans of tuna and olives with razor beaks and wrenching talons,

heedless of the proprietor huddled behind the cash register.

"I'd of pulled out the shotgun but shooting one's a federal crime."

the store manager told the reporter.

In Texas the birds weigh down the phone lines and bully other birds.

They will not take lip from a flamingo.

They steal shrimpers' nets and maraud picnic areas even on holidays.

And when the world warms they take to the air,

and people to the north have misgivings about the spring

because that means the harriers are returning.

2011

Forgiving God

This poem was my first attempt to reframe my faith when things went south in 2009. It does not constitute actual forgiveness. That came, but it took another year to really let it go.

It is the hardest thing to do because when He effs up it's a doozy.

Of everyone who lets you down, and that is absolutely everybody,

He lets you down the worst. He leaves you thinking,

He of all people should have known better.

Our failures cause rear-enders or make the price of biscuits go up.

His failures twist universes into knots.

He's that bull stumbling into the china shop, shearing worlds in two,

And He wears the memory like a wooden plate tied round His neck with string.

So many plates, so many strings you can hear Him far off, coming.

So how do you go forward when you have all the power and He has none?

First appreciate the irony. Then do the thing He would have done

in a more competent age, and set Him a task that has nothing to do

with you or his most recent error – bring word to you from a long lost friend,

let you witness love without being involved. Let you see kindness

with your own eyes, love of the variety that smashes rocks on its forehead

and contradicts credulity. And as always, look for the sign of His handiwork,

the surprise hitch you could not have included in the instructions,

some happy "extra" thrown onto the job, a coincidence of events,

a familiar name inscribed in a letter.

Then you know He is on the job and stimulated.

Extract no promises, God has no compass to keep Him aright,

it is one step at a time for Him, the same as me and you.

And start saving, now, for the next big fuck-up, because God is let loose

on the unaware world and anything can happen.

2010

In a Hotel Lounge Outside Duluth

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

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

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

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

But he clings to character, stammers

His Thank you Ma'am but home's a distance,

And the roads up Moorhead way are slick.

To no avail. She's deaf. Changing.

Already she's a brute brown bear

In the northerly wood,

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

Centipede On Chicken Curry

Fork and knife to left and right

But before digging in I see

Dancing like a deity on unpolished rice

Two dozen legs waving at me.

In Libya kids pluck centipedes larger

Than this one by far from holes

In the sand and swallow them armored

And wriggling, whole,

But that's not our way here in Brewster,
Here we give our plates a push
And pray our appetites return
In time for eggs and toast.

Little guest, I see you twirling

On my buttered rice like Krishna -
An envoy from the Sixth Kingdom doing

The jitterbug on my dinner.

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

At the Ball Park

Ball Day at the old ball park and before the game Lyman Bostock throws out a couple dozen baseballs

and all us fans stand on our seats and reach for them.

When Carew's turn comes everyone cheers.

Even the kids stop scouting for vendors and ice cream in a cup for a minute.

And when the vendor does come by he stands in everyone's view.

So we watch him instead, pouring two bottles of beer at a time, holding his dollars in his teeth.

1978

Against Nature

No thing ever tried

because things do not intend

They do, but they do not on purpose

No thing ever cried they lack the ducts to do it

No thing showed courage at least not of the thinking sort their boldness is close to stupidity

This is not to cheat creatures

This is not to undermine them

or their difficult journeys

But it is to say that it is us that makes them beautiful

They need our eyes to be seen our voices to speak our souls to put souls in them

If there is a spirit in the forest it is because we breathed it there

If there is beauty in the woodrose we fashioned it with our eyes

If there is purity here it's in a dream our hearts have dreamed

We reward the industry and the valor and the grit we see it with our respect

We were the witnesses we made the falling tree make the crash

We were the suffering and the affection and the joy

Do not look for virtue in the little ones in the humble ones unlikely as it seems it is all in us

And there is our frightening responsibility

I Know Who You Are

Day after day
Like a lover with a wound
I keep after you

What have I wanted to give you all this time That I keep making offerings And promises of love Why do I run to you every chance I get And tell you again of my ardor

As if I had the answers
As if I had the cure
For all of the sickness
That walks through the world

It makes sense to me
That I peel away the mask
And see the damp light of your seeing

O my loving loved one
My huckleberry friend
Cast with me up the waters,
We float, hands close
But never quite touching

How many times I have longed To hold you in my arms And give you kisses deep My silent good companion

You the mind inside my mind
You the breathing presence
And though you have never spoken
I have wooed you all this time

My other, my angel, my flower
I write and you read
without words

To the Soul Every Day Is the Sabbath

No toil shall undo it

neither on Monday nor on Tuesday.

No task can distract it from its purposes

of a Wednesday or a Thursday.

It keeps Friday holy

and takes Saturday off

and on the seventh day it rests

just like all the other ones.

The loss for the workworld

is a gain for the sofa,

just gentle praying

that sounds like snoring.

It Laid Down Its Life

You wonder if it's true
the thing that people say
that this selfish thing
dozing on its throne
would lay its life
down for you.
Conjure scenarios —
the attacker on the street,
the bullet headed for your heart,

the soul leaping into the gap
The music swells
and out come the hankies
but the truth is
more homely
the soul laid down its
life for you
the moment that you met

Sparrow in the Hangar

The bird in the hangar is trying to escape by the opening at the top but there's a screen there preventing it.

The bugs clotted in the mesh regard the bird.

Ordinarily they would not feel collegial
but there is a sense they are all in the same soup now.

We're very close to being out,
the bugs insist over their shoulders.

They cling to the screen, to the fresh clean air of

freedom licking their chitinous faces.

The bird knows bugs are idiots but she is having trouble, too.

There must be a way, but where is it?

You and I watch this drama for an hour,

the bird scanning the length of the arched roof, searching for a way out.

After the longest time it swoops down to where we are and escapes via the enormous open door that is big enough to let an airplane in.

Otherwise, correct me,
but hangars would all be full of dead birds,
airplanes would be buried up to their wings
in the husks of those who perished in despair,
the sparrows, the swallows, the beetles, the bats,
every creature who wandered in
then couldn't find its way out.

Except somehow we do get out, at least for a time, and fly far away.

2011

Compassion for the Tall

Many admire these long drinks of water.

Women like gazing into their misty mountaintops, wondering about the wildlife leaping about up there.

They feel their blouses are always being peered down through.

Other men imagine everything is proportional – Big feet, big hearts.

The tall one is expected to be older and wiser,
But obviously that can't be true.

I have looked myself into the eyes of the tall, and found them to be intelligent and empathetic, like sorrowful giants in certain fairy tales who watch the children play in the moat, yet they are never quite accepted by the populace and they are always swoony for love, any love.

These treelike beings were babes like the rest of us, and babies they remain, but wailing from the clouds at the impositions life hands up to upon them, and them unable ever to find a place to hide!

2013

Runner

Are you running to escape your genetic inheritance?
All those dumpy aunts and uncles, mother with her thunder thighs, father and his love handles.
Only by running can you keep their bodies from overtaking you.
Don't look, they are gaining.
They are about to scoop you up into their arms.

2014

God's Body

The campaign raged into its eighth decade, hopeless from the get-go.

All God had to do was think of his enemies and they ceased to exist.

You would be talking to a guy, and suddenly he was no longer there.

God would wait until they got within a spear-throw to blink, and then he laughed that awful empty laugh.

What an asshole he was.

And that was why, despite the danger, there was never a shortage of volunteers.

They signed up by the thousands, eager to end the tyranny, the caprice, and that gruesome laugh.

And the soldiers fought all their lives, until God thought of them, or they died.

The Lord God mowed them down by the million, and he laughed his giant belly-laugh.

One day God slipped up, he became intoxicated with his own self-regard and lapsed into a kind of holy coma.

A group of commandos came upon him as he lay openmouthed on the sand, and they lanced him in the neck and armpit and groin.

Divine blood rushed from his wounds, till the seashore stank for miles.

It was a mighty and an unexpected victory.

Without asking, they stripped his body with long knives, and peeled away his fat in lengthy strips.

They rendered the fat, which screamed in the cauldron, and filtered it through cheesecloth.

Altogether they saved thirty-two thousand barrels of oil from God's body.

The oil was distributed to the people of the world, who burned it in lamps.

The lamps stayed lit for the lifetimes of the people.

They read, and talked, and danced, and it was their turn to laugh, to the light of God's pure oil.

And though they were nervous about the darkness that was coming, they had no regrets.

2009

We Irish

It is said we hate the body and it's true.
It is said we punish with silence and we do.
Slow to anger, slow to judge, good thing we never hold a grudge.

From The Clouds, by Aristophanes

I tread the air and contemplate the sun.

Stars for friends and supper for the grass.

Let me say how happy I am – very.

Peaceful like I was never born, and maybe I wasn't.

Peaceful as if I was dead, and who's to say I'm not?

Someone popped the blister.

I was here and now I'm gone.

I think of myself as a holy pretzel

and the salt's all gone and I've never been baked

and never even twisted nor ground into flour.

I'm still waving in a field somewhere.

Or maybe my fingers are just little bones,

strung on silk and rattling in the breeze.

1970

Cholla's Revenge

A spine no bigger than my thumb,

poking up from the roadside,
a lifetime spent in a dried out ditch,
California cars with important destinations
speeding by, paying you no mind.
But one day, growing at the rate
of ten centimeters per year,
you're going to make it to the highway's edge
and really give it to somebody's tires.

1995

When the Moon Looks Down Upon Us

it sees the sea, and it remembers
the rolling and pitching in the dark
and the contractions that signaled
it was time to take its leave
And though it rests now like a pearl
hung high in the night
It rose out of water and into the light,
dripping and shining like
the ferocious tears of a child being born

Groom

He is bashful, with a grin of self-deprecation, like who am I to have his own day.

All his friends came, and the joke is that George found someone to marry him.

She is satisfied, it is her biggest day and she has escaped her crazy mother and crazy family to start a new one herself.

The world sucks, he is out of work, and she's stuck on a third-shift restaurant crew. But when it's time for the newlyweds to dance, they stagger through a waltz, one foot seeking to avoid the other, and they look into one another's eyes, and his shoulders shake and he sobs.

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.

Couple Spotted Along Fairview Avenue

Walking past the cafe before dawn,

the young couple are swinging their held hands.

They seem ecstatic and -- uncool.

He steps behind her and starts to massage her shoulders

As they are walking, then figures, the hell with that and hugs her around the middle, hands on her breasts.

Clearly, he is grateful that she has shown him her nakedness.

This was the greatest night of his life.

For her part, she walks in a skip step,

leaping at one point to swat the awning valance.

The look on her face is one of joyful accomplishment.

This boy adores her and she was equal to the challenge.

She doesn't look at him directly,

but she grins as she takes long strides down the sidewalk,

confident in her power.

2013

Cottonwood

In May the fluff begins to float.

It is the feather of the cottonwood

Mightiest tree rising up from the Mississippi

And shooting into the atmosphere.

How can an airborne thing grow

Into so mammoth a being?

Because it is still light in its wood

This ribbed pillar is mostly air,

With skies of space between every particle
So even as it thumps its giant heart
It is already beginning to fall

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.

2005

I learned, after working on this for several days, from an old prose translation, that it is almost word for word from a newer translation by Daniel Landinsky, which I had on my shelf. Guess I just remembered it too well.

Roads

Macadam, asphalt, blacktop, tar.

These surfaces will take you anywhere, speeding through the countryside, every bend a mystery,

every unevenness a jolt. Roads on islands are conflicted because they cannot get you anywhere really.

Mountain roads turn cars into eagles, breasting the current

then streaking down, eyes open wide.

Shore roads and causeways lick the water while the water licks them back.

The dead end road is indeed a death, irreversible and to be avoided, until such time as you wish to back out.

Expressways and beltways that traffic courses through

like blood through muscle, every car a note in a mighty song.

City boulevards throw each car into the spotlight, like the next arrival at the ball.

Alleyways where cats trip by on tiptoe, and the modest lane that guides us to the garage, the squeaky brake that tells you you are home.

1983

Hand On Knee

Look what I can still do.

A hand on your kneecap,
or just above the kneecap,
says you belong to me,
I will own you forever,
just like before, at the movies,
at your folks, on a bench
alongside moving water.
We may be feuding,
you may fix me in your eye,
but I have you in hand,
bone against flesh,
I claim you, you are mine,
I will never let you go.

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.

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."

1976

My Friend Paul

Growing up in adjacent houses in Amherst –

The only old houses in a new neighborhood –

We were natural friends.

Paul was thin and austere like an El Greco lord,

The come hither smile always played on his lips --

I think I was kind of in love with him,

Or at the minimum studying to be just like him.

We seldom told the truth, to one another or ourselves.

We walked the suburban blacktop at night,

Heading to Essig's package store for Swisher Sweets,

Which being underage we were obliged to steal.

We talked about sex --

"I would definitely try it once," Paul told me, "just to see what it's like."

In 1968 I drove him to the ship in San Pedro that took him to Vietnam.

After the war we saw each other, but our lives diverged.

I moved away and he drove truck for my stepdad Dick.

In his 40s he saw a pattern form on his chest

That resembled a Mayan calendar, crablike, crenelated and purple.

I figured it was mesothelioma from all those barrels of chemicals

He trucked from the city.

Cleveland is cancer country, everyone knows,

It breeds in the water and air, and also dirt,

It's in the sandwiches the lunch ladies served with school ceiling asbestos.

But this was caused by Agent Orange, which took so many boys,

And the government poked itself like the Pillsbury Doughboy

And the government giggled and said, Who, me?

Sweet-sad Paul nodded when he pulled up his shirt

And we beheld the mask growing out of him, growing

He never fought for anyone's freedom but his own.

Paul lived for the rueful glass, the stoked pipe -- "Living the dream," he called it.

hugged him that last time, and wept into my pillow that night.

Beautiful Paul – I knew we were all going to go, But it killed me to see you go first.

2014

every day.

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

What She Would Say

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

The 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.

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.

Parking Lot

The attendant is angry.

His edger is missing,

And in a crack in the blacktop

Near the corner of Seventh and Wabasha,

Five weeds are sticking their heads up,

Looking for trouble.

Old Men Fight Over Old Lady With Facelift

Howard and Hal were confined to a nursing home in Gardena, but they both eyed the lovely Ida, 77. Ida was the looker of the facility, with a face like a great old actress, noble and well contoured. Her secret was, she had had work done.

The two men competed for her, standing at the dining room door when she entered, though the door was always propped open.

With a full head of white hair, trophy-winning golfer Hal was once quite the dancer, but now had a star-shaped tumor in his chest. One-time bank officer Howard, with his bushy mustache and remarkable teeth, owned a boat somewhere, although he could no longer pilot it.

The two found Ida intoxicating, always seeking her glance and approval, never mind that they had both been impotent for years. It seemed to each man that she offered a way around death, to be acknowledged by a woman with such features.

Over the course of weeks the focus of the triangle began to morph, from mutual enchantment to hostile rivalry.

One Tuesday, Hal elbowed Howard into the doorway to the social room. Howard, who had a new hip implanted just three months previously, cracked his glasses on the doorframe.

Two days later, Howard stood at table and announced to all who were listening, "You, Harold McManus, are a barbarian and a bastard."

Hal drew himself up, tipped over the table, spilling several cups of weak coffee, a plastic pitcher of ice water and three Melmc saucers of pineapple upsidedown cake.

Hal stormed over the table and began kicking Howard with his cleated golf shoes, which were not actually allowed in the center. The cleats struck Howard at the cheek and ear and blood began to flow. Howard scrambled awkwardly to his feet, but Hal was ready, pushing him backward into a Hummel figurine

showcase. Howard sat in a daze among the cracked shelves and ceramics.

Hal turned to Ida, but she was intent on the image of Montel Williams, selling long term care for seniors.

Hal would live only three more weeks. They found him shaking in his bed and were unable to revive him. Howard would continue for two years before succumbing to a stroke.

The beautiful Ida was still among us at 88, maintaining that improbable straight line under her jaw, still with the shining green eyes, and deaf as a hardened post.

Diving Board

My son, 6, has already jumped into the YMCA pool,

tumbling end over end, then skittering to the lip like a spider.

Now I stand at the tip of the bobbing 15 foot board, paralyzed.

I did not know I was afraid of this, and I don't know what I fear exactly.

People do not die in large numbers doing this.

Still I am like a Greek statue out on a limb, and eventually

I beg my way backwards down the ladder, elbowing past the baffled children,

who smell of chlorine.

A minute later I climb up again, and in my shame I pretend to be brave,

like that was a joke before.

I plunge headlong, like a Greek statute, break the surface, and keep going down,

still like a Greek statue, to the blue cement floor.

Slowly I begin to rise again, like a dislodged log.

I am so inexperienced, I forget to hold my breath, and my lungs are close to bursting.

When I finally find light and drew air in again, I wipe my eyes

to the splashing and screaming around me.

How brave people have to be, hurling themselves into danger,

as if nothing could happen, as if we have a written guarantee.

And diving into this mystery, like it's just a joke, as if no one ever dies,

as if everyone wakes up every morning with light in their eyes

and the sun on their faces, is a lie, a lie that keeps us going.

I knew this, in my bones, it's so obvious.

But just now, quaking and cold on the fiberglass board, as if I was

looking into death's own eyes, I didn't understand.

1993

The Sugar House

time to lock the summer house and bed the waterlines with straw winter wants its solitude and double-bolted doors the sugar house is shutting down you can hear the babies cry red cheeks rumpling in the sun hush little children goodbye

Memorial Day

Just the other side of the airport, on a bluff overlooking the Minnesota River, is Fort Snelling National Cemetery. It's a classic military cemetery, with thousands of identical markers laid out like poppies in Flanders fields.

The cemetery abuts the area where I walk my dog, so I walk through there frequently. Few people buried there were killed in battle. If you served in the armed forces, it's your right to be interred here, and your spouse's. I always pause a moment, when I see on the marker a death date between 1965 and 1972. And think: there but for the grace of God is me.

t takes me back to my experiences with the draft. I'm a little hazy on it. It was 1969, the haziest year of them all. I was a hippie wannabee, full of contempt for LBJ and General Hershey. I had a dozen plans for my life, and none of them involved rice paddies.

I remember toying with the idea of filing as a conscientious objector, but it didn't work for me. They asked you whether you'd attack Ho Chi Minh with a tire iron if you came upon him raping your Aunt Sally, and I had to admit I wasn't too hot on that idea. When the Selective Service form asked if I wanted to overthrow the United States Government by force or violence, I wrote, "force."

I was what you'd call a nominal draft resister. I attended a few rallies and read everything disrespectful I could get my hands on. I read in Paul Krassner's magazine *The Realist* that your draft board had to file everything you sent them.

So I sent them a six-pound bonito, a handsome ocean fish I purchased at the Grand Central Market in downtown Los Angeles. The idea was that the draft board would be helpless except to live with the stench of a decaying fish in their file cabinet. Instead -- figure this -- they drafted me. I was in the U.S. Army, technically, for a couple of weeks, classified as AWOL.

I wasn't even aware I'd been drafted; I was hiking around in Alaska at the time, away without leave, without a thought in my head, and only found out about my induction later. Then I applied to the nearest college I could find -- Pepperdine University in Los Angeles, also known as Pat Boone University -- and hid there, cowering, under its ivied protection, until the lottery replaced the draft.

So I never went to Vietnam, and I never missed it. But the war was part of my life anyway. I took my childhood friend, Paul Plato, to his ship in San Pedro when he shipped out. For a while I knew a couple of actual deserters in Los Angeles. They were a pair of goofy guys who claimed to have escaped from interment at The Presidio. I never believed their stories, but one night they were rousted from their beds and led off by MPs.

At my first high school reunion, I learned that our one fatality was Gary Farin, a sweet kid from the wrong side of the tracks, who stepped on a land mine somewhere and was no more. We played Little League together when we were nine. It is hard to say who was the coward and who was the hero. Poor Gary Farin was no one's idea of a hero; he was just a poor dope who couldn't work the system like I did.

I thought I was an intellectual hero, full of higher ideals than flag and conscription, but I kept myself far from harm's way, didn't I? One more thing I have in common with George W. Bush. When I think of 56,000 of my generation tossed out there to die defending our Laugh-In way of life, I get blue. Thirty years later, it still hurts.

But there is one thing I would like to set straight. When the war ended, an urban legend popped up, claiming that our returning soldiers were routinely spat on by those who didn't go, and called baby-killers.

People who spread this awful story must have had an axe to grind: blame the defeat on the hippies and the liberals. But I swear it never happened. Or if it happened on a couple of bizarre, sick occasions, they were anomalies.

Vietnam vets suffered from a host of problems, from post-traumatic stress disorder and Agent Orange to unemployment in the stagflation of the 70s and early 80s. Many wondered where their reward was for the contribution they'd made. Where was their GI Bill?

What a terrible choice our country forced on a generation of boys: be good and die stupidly or be marked for life, or be smart and survive, but feel like a traitor to your own generation.

And I look at these graves at Fort Snelling, row on row on row on row, their gray faces from jet exhaust -- and I want to salute.

To a Woodpecker

I too have been banging my head like a jackhammer of bone on the trunk of a tree till my thoughts rattle round like Odysseus for home will I pry apart cambium with my nose and find grubs in the soft meat or will I spend a lifetime skullstruck up a pole reiterating the error of my life?

Building The Poem

A mighty gate groans open from the very first line, This is your declaration that something great is under construction,

and the reader is advised to pull over and idle his engine.

The opening stanza has a curse placed upon it — it must be good but it can't swamp the boat.

You have to have something to follow it up.

And isn't that the problem with everything, the middle? Being born is amazing, and going out again at the end is dramatic,

but in between is where the good ideas are stifled like sneezes into kleenex at funerals, in between is where we sow sunflowers and salt to keep people guessing.

And now the suspense builds, as the first plates spun on sticks start to wobble, and the performer furrows his brow and glances up at the source of soonest danger,

all the while perched on a steel cable stretched taut with one end in the scrummy tenement, the other on Park Avenue.

This is a good time for the neighborhood clown

To roll out on his unicycle and reveal his broken heart,
with a brief digression about childhood disappointment,
and all the things you went without.

.

And then, not with a clap but something like a hush as the crowd quiets and a white donkey shambles into the courtyard riderless, its ears poking through the old straw hat, and dragging a rope of clanking cans by its tail, between its clapboard teeth, where all can see -- a pink begonia as big as the world.

The Water Boom

Bicycling below Hidden Falls, I saw a water boom tucked against a storm sewer at the edge of a cliff.

Water booms are those long stocking-like absorbent ropes

they put in the water when there's an oil or chemical spill.

This boom was perhaps twenty foot long, and as I rolled past it,

I saw it was twisting in a serpentine fashion.

I stopped my bike and saw it had a face,

that looked like it was contorted from always weeping.

When I looked into the face, which was clenched like a fist,

I saw that the boom was my mother.

My heart sank at the sight of her, dead for twelve years, yet here she was transformed, and spiraling in the ditch. She could not talk, she could only make a sucking sound from her lamprey mouth. I did not know what to do. Is this how the world works, i asked myself, that a woman who suffered so much in life should be dispatched to suffer even worse humiliation, soaking up the poison that shoot out of our houses. Or is this just a dream to remind me of her heart, and her pride, and her wish to take on pain rather than see it attach to me.

Weeping, I dragged my mother like a sodden carpet to the river's edge, I released her and watched her slip

I held my hand over my eyes against the afternoon sun, that shone on the turning waters like diamonds.

2013

away.

Geese

How virtuous they seem this morning squabbling on Marydale Pond, pointing in every direction, leaderless, humming from hard migration.

They are just the most recent group to descend into St. Paul to rest up, judging from the goose crap everywhere like green toothpaste in the grass.

Their virtue is their honking courage attempting this 1400 mile flight all the way down to South Padre Island

across every kind of junkyard and garage.

Not one of them's a drama queen,
drawing attention to the epicness underway
or the brothers who fell to the hunters' guns
or got sick and couldn't flap another flap,
They just shut their beaks and kept flying.

Living Without Friends

You told yourself you could do this without them If you had their help it would undo the purpose. You recused yourself from the argument at hand And folded into quietness there. You proceeded to suffer for a time At your hunger and all your loneliness, At the big nothing there that ate you like a bug. And the weeping nights from leaving them all behind. You shut yourself up like a foreclosed house And so never told a lie to those you loved And you never craved attention like a clown So you were never disappointed or betrayed So you performed only worthy work and set it As an offering on the shelf of the world. So it was what it wanted to be then, Clean and honest as a plank. Now when you think of them It is no longer as "temptation," Or the pounding polka of their laughter Or the wringing of their embrace But of the goodwill that they bore you, Like a promise you would never meet again Yet carry one another by the heart Like a brass lantern that never goes out.

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

Walking the Seminary Bridge Before Dawn, 1963

I went away to a junior seminary in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, to train for the priesthood. I was 13 years old. This was how every day began, at 5:30 p.m.

The boys slide from their bunks and tiptoe to the trough to brush their teeth and spit.

Now dressed, they pound down two tall flights of stairs and exit into the still-dark morning.

Down at the pond the ducks are remarking, the footfalls of 60 boys echo on the planks.

They enter the rectory and pass through an underground corridor

to climb three final steps to the chapel entrance.

From the darkness, everything suddenly becomes light.

A hundred lit candles. The censer, swinging. Smoke rising.

We kneel on the bare boards. Our knees have gotten used to it.

Before them is the crucified Christ, and the breast of the pelican, jetting blood.

All through the night, while the Catholic boys slept, Jesus suffered for them.

Joy | Heartbreak | Nothing

Those lucky enough to experience joy this fall day are saddened by the shortness of it.

Those whose hearts were broken today are glad it's over when it is.

Those who feel nothing special from sunup to sundown feel nothing at all.

For them there is no short, no long.

It is just another day.

2013

McCartney at 100

They wheel him out to the balcony to blow out a single candle on the coconut cake.

His grandchildren and great-grandchildren sing to him and applaud.

They open his present for him: an old black Beatle wig from the days, still in its shrinkwrap.

He nods as the nurse positions it on his bald. mottled head.

With his drooping eyes, the wig and custard face, he could pass for a chimpanzee child.

The old man looks out at the orchard surrounding the estate.

The offspring grin. They are glad he doesn't live in a home.

Here he has full time care around the clock. All the beautiful ones are gone.

Van and Joni and Mick and Neil. Ringo. He got a card from Iggy today -- the only other one.

Ten-year-old Maeve pushes a ukulele into his hands.

Trembling he finds the frets and manages a pair of words. Missing. Kissing.

He looks up at them all, so prosperous and glad.

Sure, he lost a lot, but was there ever a more fortunate man?

But he was the one who worried about the future. We can't keep doing this, he said.

Let's change our name. Let's go up on the roof. Let's motor through Scotland.

Something bad would happen unless measures were adopted and carried out.

And then the words are there, the fingers find the strings.

I'll pretend that I'm kissing the lips I am missing. And I'll send all my loving to you.

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

King of the St. Paul Poets

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

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

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

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

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

When I came to I was changed. I struggled to stand. My fingers tingled. I felt an egg, a protruding bud

from my brow. I looked in the mirror in the dirty warehouse toilet and washed away the blood.

And I remembered. I had a final exam at one o'clock in my class on prosody in the Humanities Building at the University. I had completely forgot.

The Borg Warner clock over the carburetor kits said 1:25.

Snow was falling and wind was blowing.

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

Where's your money? The driver asked. Eighty five cents!

I looked at him like Long John Silver under the egg and said You have to get me to the University! and took a seat halfway to the back.

The passengers were coming home from morning shift.

One man wore a hat that said Gopher Gears,
and the same word on his jacket and thermos.

The phrase has stuck with me over the years.

I sat quiet but in my mind I was standing and telling them

Do not be afraid my brothers and sisters,

I will make the journey from St. Paul to Minneapolis,

I will do business there with TAs and professors,

I will be valorous in my actions and acquit myself in a way you will be proud of. The assembly and forklift people

will not be ashamed this day of one of their own climbing the heights of classical poetry.

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

I grabbed a blue book from the stack and read the question:

Analyze Houseman's "Eight O'Clock" and explain how poetic form helps further the poet's message. Ordinarily I might have struggled in vain

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

I knew this poem by heart somehow. I had knelt on its floor and drunk its dark waters.

I scanned the poem in fifteen seconds and commenced to write in big black letters.

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

I stood and threw the blue book on the desk, the astonished professor shrank as I left the hall and the teaching assistants whispered about the mysterious boy from St. Paul. I would get an A, of course, but that was not the point, I was transformed, beyond dreams.

I stood on the walkover bridge and gazed out over the brilliant white cloud of toilet paper plant steam.

Gods and goddesses choose us mortals

not by our bloodlines or superior mothering

but because a magnet pulls metal down from the sky
that tempers and makes us fit vessels to be king.

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

1979

The Mountain with Low Self-Esteem

There was a mountain out west who did not feel good about himself.

Oh sure, he was tall. But there were lots taller ones. He was snow-capped. But only barely.

He had the sun in the morning and the moon at night. But criminy, who doesn't?

Something was missing, and it caused him to slump. Sometimes he heaved a huge sigh, and giant rocks would tumble down his sides and shower station wagons and tour buses.

What did he care. He was a mountain.

The other mountains were not much help. 'There's one mountain that will never amount to a hill of beans, ' one said.

'If I had an attitude like that, I think I would plateau out,' said another.

What was the mountain's problem exactly? Darned if we know. But it laid him low, or as low as a 7,482 foot high object could be laid.

One day the wise hootie-owl alit on his peak. 'You know,' the owl said, 'you could use a hobby, to take your mind off things. Have you considered taking up forestry, or mining?'

But the mountain was in no mood for a pep talk.

'Oh, blow it out your beak, hootie owl,' he said and scowled, causing a landslide on his north slope.

One day the mountain felt an itch on its nose. Well, it wasn't a nose exactly. It was more of a crag. But you get the idea. What the itch was, was a human child, splashing under a waterfall.

'Who dares to splash under my waterfall?' the mountain bellowed. Why, I'll erupt, that's what I'll do. I'll spew hot lava all over your shoes!'

But the child was no idiot. 'You're not a volcano, silly,' the child said. 'You're just a regular mountain.'

The mountain simmered at this upbraiding. Where did this human child get off addressing him in such a fashion?

'Nevertheless,' the child continued, 'I think you're very beautiful, and the air surrounding you is fresh and wonderful, and I love the streams splashing down your sides.'

'Oh, right!' the mountain replied, for he was not good at taking compliments.

'Seriously,' said the child. 'In my home state, you would be the greatest thing anywhere!'

'And what state is that?' the mountain asked.

'Minnesota,' the child replied.

'Ah, what's Minnesota like? Like this?'

'No, it's flat as a pancake. You'd be a tremendous hit there.'

After the child left, skipping, the mountain pondered his options. 'A mountain in Minnesota -- even a relatively stumpy mountain like myself -- could do very well indeed.'

So when the first rays of sunshine alit on his snow-capped dome, using all his will and determination, the mountain began the slow migration to Minnesota. It wasn't easy. The mountain calculated that it was moving at approximately the rate of a sixteenth of an inch per year. 'Minnesota, here I come!' he said.

But climate change came to his assistance. A wind system out of the Rockies combined with huge packs of F1 tornadoes, combined with the crash of an enormous asteroid outside Omaha to nudge him across the Minnesota state line in a mere four years.

And oh, the welcome the mountain received the next morning! Instead of boarding their buses for school, all the children rushed to climb the mountain. They climbed in the trees and splashed in the streams. They jumped from rock to rock, and gathered snow in their hands in the middle of July.

They saw eagles soaring and hummingbirds darting back and forth. They saw bear cubs playing and pumas ready to pounce.

'Yahh!' said the kids, as they ran from the pumas.

Minnesota would never be the same. This was bigger than the Mall of America.

Adults caught on as well. Having a mountain good for business and a stimulus to the economy. Even if the mountain was sitting right where the high school used to be.

Adults soon caught on as well. Having a mountain in town was going to be good for business and good for the economy. Even if it was sitting right where the high school used to be.

1999

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 am here at your window, drapes flowing.

Speaking to the moon like a friend.

I am the ghost who lives in this house, Where the living come and go. The secret I cannot convey to you --That I lived and loved and knew

The Sign In The Store Window

When you say you can't imagine I know exactly what you mean --

you mean it hurts to imagine, and who needs that unnecessary pain

when there is enough of the real stuff to go around.

The truth is we imagine all the time of course and as bad as this is

we imagine much worse. If you couldn't imagine you wouldn't be afraid.

The truth is we are losers, we will lose everything we have and everything we know,

each lovely face will crumple in the flame and if we don't see it

it's only because our face caught fire first, but someone saw

and so someone's heart must break.

We knew what the deal was when we signed on.

Everything must go, that's what the sign in the store window says.

The shelves will be stripped and the roof set ablaze, and every thing inside be swallowed in the roar.

It's no good to walk the white chalk line, bereft, mumbling,

tearing at our hair and clothes, no one can live for a week like that.

But it's not a bad thing to pack it away in the back of our mind,

closeout, clearance, make us an offer!

The other creatures, rooted in the earth or yawning in the grass,

they don't have to deal with this.

Next time life seems pointless, next time you want to watch it shoot out of the can,

remember that fact: Why would this excruciation occur, why are you able

to imagine this and so much more, until every tear sizzles

to a salty nothing, if you meant nothing?

Brother, if your heart doesn't break ... you're not here.

2010

The Chain

Nowadays it's all celebrities, we've given up on individual selves and now seek someone famous to enjoy successes on our behalf.

So when a ballplayer or rock star is having a hard time, we root for them, as if their progress will lift us with them, a crumb will fall where we are crouched.

They used to publish sob stories in the paper.

Personal interest stories that people could relate to,
assigned to name writers who could no longer report:

Little Jonnie Potvin has no teeth, tongue, or lips, thanks to a hit and run on West 36th Street, but you don't hear him complaining.

Or the crazy toothless mother of fourteen still beating laundry against a rock, and ask Do you want to be gueen for a day?

And they ran one of these at least every week, reminding the slobs who thought they had it bad they were doing pretty well by comparison.

It stands to reason, if some are better off than others, then you could line up the earth's population from luckiest to least, from Brad Pitt down,

who glide through life to the last, indisputable guy, the one the dark clouds have stopped following, whom the second to worst-off guy feels sorry for.

Legless and eyeless, each breath a source of hacking pain,
purulence seeping from every cracked pore,
without hands with which to work, or beg, or pray

This one has no money, no talents, no health, no family to bear him along, only the consciousness of his own condition, and we will be friends

and I will pat his palsied thigh and read to him in the street about the exploits of Brad on the opposite end

and thank the Lord for all we have received

2011

How To Have Good Things Happen

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 it 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 little bit crippled.

Pretty soon, by definition, you are dancing.

Love, but be discreet.

Everyone twists an open valve.

See what the other hands are betting then open it up, so the strong of heart can stand and follow.

Questions I Always Ask

I always ask myself, what good is this?

Does it make anybody's day?

Is it fun or funny?

Does it contain useful information?

Is it fascinating on its own merits?

Is it a suitable gift?

Or am I just jerking off?

This checklist doesn't always stop me, but it sometimes does. And as Leslie says, that is always a good thing.

I had another thought, then forgot it. Now i remember! This one is a killer: Is a poem the best vehicle for expressing your thought? This is a killer because, if you really want to share a thought, why use a format 97% of people are resistant to? Or is the thought only of interest to the remaining 3%? Why would that be -- there ARE reasons, but they must apply.

How else might you get the thought across? Carved on a tree trunk? Leafleted by a blimp? Message in a bottle? Whispered in the ears of those who are asleep?

Two Paul Finleys

It is hard today to accept the death of a child, but it used to be a common thing.

It was one main reason families had lots of children – to absorb the losses due to disease, hunger, violence.

My own father was a replacement child.

Two years before he was born his parents had another son, who died of pleurisy.

This child too was named Paul Finley.

Life just used to be spookier, as death was an abiding presence In every family.

What seems normal to us, almost an entitlement -- our children will surely outlive us –

was not taken for granted then.

On another note, you wonder about how child-rearing changes

when you get a second chance as my grandparents did.

By all accounts my dad was raised as a kind of blessing incarnate, a resurrected prince.

His older sister and younger brother were not given the same free pass.

This may be why my dad grew up self-involved and not especially responsible or ethical.

He got into numerous scrapes that, by the standards of the day, were quite shocking.

The worst is that he forced himself at age 15 on a young girl,

an orphan visiting the family farm, and had to give up the baby.

That's right, I may have a half-sister out there in the world, whom I have never met.

And it may be because my father had a brother before him,

Who bore the same name, and who died.

And though he was raised as a blessing, as a kind of miracle child –

his own father cursed him for his transgressions.

My dad told me this story several times, with drunken tears in his eyes.

And then his child died -- my sister Kathleen, one of the last of the "blue-babies," at age 15.

And then his child's child, my Daniele, at 24, died, by her own hand, one year ago.

Maybe these still are the olden days, and they aren't over yet,

And every now and then we need to be reminded.

2010

Fare Well, Curtis Hotel

We had had a fight back in October, '69, my California family and me, and I grabbed a shirt and my checkbook with a few dollars in it from delivering Fuller Brush for my dad that fall, and hitchhiked to LAX, wrote out a check and flew the red-eye into St. Paul. And the limo

driver listened to my tale and dropped me off at the Curtis Hotel where I shivered in my shirt by the revolving door and waited by the ashtray stand for a friend to come get me, and the first flakes fell.

Friend showed up and took me home, and told me I was on my own. I took a job in a parts warehouse and went to night school and did fairly well then I got a better job, with a desk and a door, and I met Rachel, after a while. I used to take her Sunday mornings to the brunches at the old hotel, we would feast on omelet and melon balls, bouquets of roses and asphodel, and the waiter kept our glasses full of cheap champagne, and I would peel a twenty from a roll of bills, a big shot mustn't stint at the Curtis Hotel.

So I lost that job, but we got married anyhow. We pledged our troth in a city park and danced all day in a friend's front room, but when it was time for the honeymoon, we checked into the Curtis Hotel, the only room we could afford, a single window overlooking the mall, but we slept in, switched off the bell, our only night in the Curtis Hotel.

Years later, my dad, no longer selling door to door, had some interesting news to tell: 'Your mom and I were not doing so well, so we thought a trip together might be swell. That's what's we have been meaning to tell you, son -- you were conceived in the Curtis Hotel.'

I have this memory of when I was a child, standing with my grandfather on the opposite shore of the Mississippi in LaCrosse, and he pointed and said "Minnesota is just over there," and I repeated the word and lingered on its power, and made a vow to cross that river one day. So when the plane landed years later and I stepped into the Curtis Hotel I knew this was the place where I could dwell.

When I saw it demolished on TV, the cameras caught at the final moment a window on the fourteenth floor slide up, then shatter, as the building buckled with the weight of the beds and bathtubs of all those years, its bricks all shrugged and its shoulders collapsed and the whole damn deal went to hell.

And the people building the convention hall on the same site explained no one was in Room 1410, the crew had checked out every floor. No homeless man could hide in a closet, sure today was not the final day (because is today ever the final day?). The sliding open

window had no meaning, it was no ancient honeymooner hollering No!, it was just the freak effect a dying building feels.

The hum of death vibrating every sill, so it throws up a window to let out a howl and shout out the secrets of the Curtis Hotel, and all the souls who sheltered there, who slept, and wept, and shivered, and sighed, and laughed, and loaded up their plates with more, crawled into bed, and rose, and ate, and tipped the doorman at the gate, and drove away with no thought of farewell to the spirits who stayed in the Curtis Hotel.

1986

Homes for Cash

Mounted above a TV repair shop along Dale Street is a billboard with the immense face of a man on it, tall as a movie screen.

His tie is askew, his collar is wild, like a man who has been running in his suit.

His coloring is orange and blotchy red,

as if he spent hours in a tanning booth, drinking cheap gin.

He is holding an old-time phone to his ear and grinning, Though the receiver isn't connected to anything. "I'm Steve Larson of Sunset Realty," the guy says,

"and I buy homes for cash!"

He seems both innocent and crude, as if believing that just seeing his huge face,

faking a phone call, and grinning high above the traffic, will convince us to hand over the keys to our houses.

I suspect his pals clap him on the back for pulling off

this stunt but that even he knows, when he drives

this way late at night, when the traffic dies down, that his ass could not be redder to the world, promising cash in hand if people will only turn over their homes to him, the roofs they live under, the memories that are the source of most meaning, the being-with-one-another that makes our lives sacred.

2010

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

Falling Trees (1999)

I have wondered why it is that, after all the thousands of miles I have spent wandering around in the woods, I have never heard a tree fall. Not a one. Not even a limb of one.

Do they wait until I'm gone, then as soon as I'm out of the woods and have turned my car radio on, they let fall whatever was going to fall?

I asked this question a few years back, when I was a blogger. I thought I was pretty clever.

In response a Texas man wrote me his story. His daughter Karen Schoeck was one of five hikers in Oxbow Regional Park, in eastern Oregon, one Sunday in January, walking through a stand of old firs and cottonwoods along the Sandy River. He enclosed a news clipping.

"Karen had hurried ahead of her four friends and was walking in a sandy wash," the news account said, "when a 150-foot-tall cottonwood tree behind her snapped and crashed to the ground. The rotted tree broke about 8 feet up its trunk and fell across the trail, striking Karen on the head and falling across her lower body."

The 24-year-old woman who wanted to be a naturalist died instantly.

"Trees do fall, Mr. Finley." The father told me. "I can attest to that."

The man paused. "Every night for a year I would pray for understanding. I calculate that that tree was about 150 years old, and that means it lived some 4 billion seconds in its life.

"Now I ask myself. How could Karen travel all that distance, be so far from home, and be under that fateful tree in the one instant out of 4 billion that it falls down? What did it mean? Whose idea of a good idea was this?"

I had no answer for him beyond the usual human shrugs we offer one another as we try to understand how our lives play out.

Karen loved the forest, and travel all the way from East Texas to live in one. She died doing what she loved. Many of us are less lucky than that. Many of us never even figure out what we love. But tragedy never rests with the person who dies. It stabs the hearts of those who are left behind, who are stunned and bewildered at the loss. We pray for souls departed, but the hunger for understanding remains here among us. Look into our stupefied eyes, and the tears forming there.

Sometimes it just takes time. Eventually I did hear a tree fall, almost 20 years years after asking my original question. I was walking along the Mississippi, about a mile from where I lived. About 50 yards behind me, a half of a giant cottonwood -- must've weighed ten tons -- split off and slid like an iceberg into the brush!

So you need to be patient.

1995

The Heights of Tài Shān

The call went out that the magazine had received a \$5,000 grant to sponsor a poem competition, to see who could write the best peace poem reflecting the saying by Thích Nhất Hạnh:

"Walk as if you are kissing the Earth with your feet."

Poets rejoiced at an award so handsome, and began ransacking their notebooks and manila folders for their best peace poem.

Others bent to the task of writing a new peace poem so transcendent they would be showered with a significant financial blessing.

Coffeehouses filled with the sound of caffeinated scribbling.

Paeans to peace proliferated at each table.

"I've got it!" one poet said, and stood impulsively to read his work, a 45-line narrative about water trickling down the crystalline slopes of the holy mountain Tài Shān.

"It is luminous," one poet conceded, frowning. "But might it not be too specific?" another asked, prodding the poem for vulnerabilities.

Everyone sensed it would be a long climb to reach the top of Tài Shān. Many poets essayed the ascent, and all of them tumbled to the side.

Propitiations were offered, and rejected: no thanks.

In the spring of 2013, forty-six poets made the attempt. All fell into quarreling and despair.

Only one poet made it to the summit, a mother of two from the city of Redwood Falls. Her poem was simply a repetition of the saying of Thích Nhất Hạnh: "Walk as if you are kissing the Earth with your feet."

To which she added the single word: "Really."

2013

Bridge Moving Upriver

The first barge of spring comes round the bend, and it surprises.

It's not a set of empty barges to fill with gravel or sand.

It's a set of eight strapped barges pushed by a tug,

and visible across the barges are the spans for a new bridge

to replace the bridge on I-35 that fell last August and sent cars tumbling, killing 13 and injuring 145.

Over eighty 100-foot black I-bars of steel, a dozen premade spans,

giant tires to buffer them against pylons, compressors and an entire steel staircase in one welded piece you could sink in place and start climbing.

These bars are so large they can't fit on flatbeds, too heavy to be flown in by helicopter, you can ship them by train

but then what do you do?

You watch the barges shudder and smack against each new ripple,

It is upstream every inch, urged on by an engine a fraction their size,

and the S-curve of the river's resistance to this oncoming expedition with whistles whooshing, black smoke showing the engine's labor, and on the prow the proud name Minneapolis.

Albrecht the Not Altogether Pleasant Little Mouse

There once was a little mouse named Albrecht. And while Albrecht was not an outright wicked little mouse, he had bad habits, and had no intention of correcting them.

He wouldn't brush his teeth. Even when his mother put the toothpaste right on the brush for him and told him to brush, Abrecht just stared at it.

"What's the matter?" his mother would ask.

"I'm just not in the mood," Albrecht would answer her.

He liked to pick his nose and stick the boogers on the wall next to his bed. It was like a map, in which every booger stood for a major city, like Paris or Berlin.

Or a constellation of stars in the night sky. Though what the constellation was (a zebra standing at a cash register?) was by no means clear.

His mother was horrified when she discovered all the crusty little dots sticking to the wall.

But Albrecht did not care. All that mattered to him was that he got the boogers out of his nose.

Sure, he could have used a tissue, like civilized little mice. Albrecht was kind of a little stinker, basically.

Worse, he pooped in the sugar bowl. These weren't "accidents," like anyone can have from time to time. These were on purpose. He waited until everyone was gone, then climbed up on the kitchen table and did his business.

He liked when his mother or father dipped a spoon into the sugar and saw the offending lumps. He felt he had accomplished something. His father, a busy and emotionally distant mouse, told his mother, "Why don't you do something about that little mouse? This is starting to get on my nerves."

His mother, a good, hard-working mouse who had no choice but to leave Albrecht alone every afternoon to run errands, was aghast. This was not the sort of thing pleasant little mice did. And she could not think what provoked Albrecht to such a dastardly deed.

"Why don't you use the toilet like other little mice?" she wanted to know. "I know you know how to."

"I wasn't in the mood," was all Albrecht would say.

Albrecht liked storing cheese in his underwear drawer. He storied quite a good deal of it there, and it got very smelly and very moldy.

Now, this violated every canon of good manners, because it made his underwear smell like sharp cheddar, which was hardly conducive to proper social development.

The other little mice at mouse care would wrinkle their noses when Albrecht came by.

"There goes Stinky Cheddar Pants," one of the crueler little mice said, and the nickname stuck.

Albrecht's father, who was gone a lot on business trips, sat the little mouse down for a mouse-to-mouse talk. He talked about the importance of good grooming, and the value of making a good impression on others.

"See, if you just act like a weird little mouse, who's going to want to do business with you? They won't see you as the fine young mouse I know you to be. All they'll see is a smelly little mouse with gunk hanging from his teeth."

To the father, that seemed like a perfectly compelling argument. But Albrecht just yawned. He was in no mood to change his ways just to please other people.

One day, while his father was away on business and his mother was busy running errands, Albrecht was in his room engaged in his favorite activity, twirling crayons in his ears.

This was another bad habit, because a crayon can puncture a young mouse's eardrum, and make a mouse deaf. Not a good outcome at all.

But you know Albrecht -- he never listened, so why would he want to hear? He did what he wanted to do, and disregarded good advice.

He had got a purple crayon in his right ear, and a burnt sienna crayon in his left, when he heard -- just barely, on account of the crayons in his ears -- the doorbell.

"Oh, what is it this time," said the exasperated, smelly little mouse with bad teeth and crayons in his ears.

But when he opened the door, a big yellow cat named Eddie swiped him with one swift paw, and gobbled poor Albrecht up.

It really wasn't fair. Eddie smelled Albrecht miles away.

Sometimes, child, we forget that rules are for our own good.

Anyway, it was extremely sad. The father mouse felt it was his fault for being away on business so much.

"I never really spent much time with Albrecht," he said to himself. "And after a while, I really didn't want to."

The mother blamed herself. "What good is it to buy the groceries if there is no little mouse to cook them for?"

The two spent many evenings by the fire, thinking about Albrecht and what he really needed.

After a while, they were lucky enough to have another little mouse, whom they named Estelle. And they raised Estelle differently than they raised Albrecht.

The mother did not leave Estelle home alone, ever. And the father made trips less frequently, and did more things with her.

When Estelle did something wrong -- like peeing in the bathtub -- the mother lifted her up and covered her tummy with kisses.

"No matter what a naughty little mouse you are, I will always love you," she said.

And when Estelle put maple syrup in her father's best shoes, he just laughed.

"What a wonderful idea," he said, putting down his newspaper. "Let's make waffles."

Miguel Hernandez

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

Sometimes I'm ashamed of what goes on in the alley, the things we overturn and track into the house. It isn't your fault, it's the kind of animals we are, if we were cats we'd know when to move on. The pastures of glass we pretend we forget

the beauty of the universe trapped in a puddle of oil on a rainy stretch of road.

are always browsing at our heels,

Sun and moon, leave off your high faluting, if you were so grand would you carve us our shadows? All of us sometimes scratch at the screen — we want what is ours.

You look down, it looks down, everyone looks down these days.

All of us claim what we spot at our feet.

The Good Times

It's like you're driving the interstate

And you hit a pothole and blow out a strut

And you stand by the roadside

Kicking the chrome

And cursing the road maintenance crew

For being a day late with a shovel of patch

Saying son of a bitch what a crummy system

And you don't seem to notice ...

The headless horse in the crook of a tree ...

Or that there is no road, just stink and smoke ...

And the days that used to make you

Call on God for better times

Are never coming back.

When We Are Gone

When we are gone and the plates of the earth have shrugged, and the cupboards rattle and the rafters sift, and the groaning household teeters on the brink and the song of consciousness decays, what calendar will cordon off its days?

When we are gone and the rub of reaching fills the world, and root and branch and tongue and paw all strain as one for what is just beyond, sugar, sunshine, water, meat, and the hummingbird suspended in the air, what mind, what glance encapsulates it there?

When we are gone and the dust of our doing has flown and there are no longer angels and no men,
And our home and our skin and our story of love give way to hozannas of flies,
what spectators swarm the empty choir,
sockets twitching with surmise?

When we are gone and meaning loses meaning though your molecules and my molecules are plucked apart and strewn across this raw unwitnessable scene they are better for that blink of time, forgotten in the giddy sprawl of green.

The most beautiful poem there could be

The most beautiful poem there could be Alit on you and lit you up. To hear it was to laugh and cry, Both feelings at the same time! It was wise and absurd and remarkable And true, you wanted to dash up and down Your street yanking everyone off their porch Telling what you heard and they would get it too You would be pounding each other With joy because it represented An irrevocable change in everything that was, And the annihilation of bad beginnings And all the poems that started well But meandered off in self-destructive ways. A poem to make you wake up grinning, A poem to build stout friendships around, A poem to turn to when everything else Went gray, and the light came on again. But by the time you located a pencil And pressed it to paper, the angel Had departed, the stone had rolled back Into place and the moment was gone. You could not remember the first thing About it, something about - no -And you stood there pointing stupidly With your finger -- so close to glory, So human in your shoes.

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

Hafez: To Be A Better Poet

From the Persian

- 1. Stop talking and listen. Listen to yourself listening. Then listen to that.
- 2. Pile all your poet hats in the back yard and light them on fire. Especially any with feathers.
- 3. Remove your name from everything you do. Anonymity purifies, fame corrodes.
- 4. Drive out your own noise by inviting in others.
- 5. Stop breaking sentences into lines. Just ... breathe!
- 6. Don't talk to other poets. One god per universe is the legal limit.
- 7. Stop reading poems. Read hands, faces, hearts.
- 8. Leave notes in unexpected places. In umbrella stands, in robins' nests, on piles of moist buffalo dung.
- 9. Unless it feels like a gift, don't give it.
- 10. Stop being a poet at all. And lose the sash!

Weight Loss

People, when they diet and hit a good patch
And for a while a lot of weight comes off,
It is like a cowl has been peeled away

And you see them in their glory now
Like resurrected souls
The way they were always supposed to be

But notice the look of sorrow on them

For all that they have suffered

And all the times they were betrayed

Can I offer you one more piece of pie, Louise?
It will only go to waste on my counter
And you enjoy it so.

But now they are beautiful

Even if they are wasting from some disease

They wear a look of shining pride that says

None of you ever really knew me

And now I approach you, hands held out

Like Christ on Easter Day

1990

Whiteys

I worked the Stairmaster for half an hour, then ran three miles on the indoor track. Then I slipped on my trunks and swam eight laps.

I showered high. The endorphins were going off like Roman candles. I returned to my locker, opened the door, grabbed my briefs, and pulled them up. My, they felt so snug, so sexy, so new! You know, exercise does wonderful things to your head!

That was when I noticed none of the clothes in the locker looked familiar. Come to think, weren't my underpants just regular whiteys? But these were blue, and kind of beautiful.

Oh no, I thought, I've just put on another person's underpants.

I rubbernecked to right and left. There were naked men standing about, toweling off. I would describe them as blasé.

So, no one noticed. I stripped the briefs off with one sweep and hurled them back in the locker, slamming the door, and opened my rightful locker, one click to the left, and grabbed my own underwear.

Poor and thin in the seat, they were paradise to me now.

I dressed hurriedly and made for the exit. I had made good my escape, undetected.

But late nights I have lain awake, still dealing with the terror of that event. What if I had been found? How do you resolve a conflict like that?

Even alone, by myself, in bed, I feel the shame steal over me afresh.

And I vow, as God is my witness, I will never judge another man.

1988

Microwave

I hit the 30-second button, and being busy, step to my office, hit a key on my PC, and walk back to the kitchen. Bing, coffee's warm. But where did the 30 seconds go. Like a card pulled from a deck that gets smaller and smaller, like the tiny waves hurled round the machine, banging on the glass of time.

My Mom

Mary Josephine Mulligan Finley Konik (1924-2003)

I was asked to give my mother's eulogy when she died in 2003. My goal was to write an honest description of her, but a sweet one, the sort a loving son would write. I wrote notes for myself on index cards, then put them in the best order. It was a thick stack of cards.

During the service, things went right for a while. I talked about her love of her friends and family members – her love was fierce, and sometimes painful, but it was no joke. I talked about her place in history – an immigrant's daughter, grown up on a farm in Michigan with no water or electricity or phone as late as 1960. The depression, World War II, marrying, having children, divorcing, working three jobs for years to keep us boys fed.

Then I dropped the cards, and in my nervousness, was not able to put them back in the right order. I should have numbered them. Instead, I began reading, still early in the talk, about the horrors my mom had seen. I broke down after a few minutes of the distressing parts, and had to stop. I never got to the sweet stuff, how grateful all my life I was for her love. So the cut-in-half eulogy came across as fairly dire.

The first card I read was about meeting my father, an engineering student at GMI in Flint. She was waitressing at a café, and he hit on her. It turns out she was a dead ringer for a pretty girl my dad had been stalking for two weeks, who finally sent him away. He invited her to a wedding the following Saturday. At the wedding, my dad got drunk, and stood and announced that he and my mom were engaged – just to see the looks on people's faces. My mom wanted out of Flint, so she went along with the idea. But it was a poor way to start a life together.

The next card was about my sister Kathleen, who was born cyanotic – a bluebaby. She was not supposed to live long, but she surprised everyone by making it to her teen years. But she was never strong.

One sign of her weak heart was the fact that she still had her baby teeth at 15. My mother, knowing the value of looking good, arranged for her to have her teeth pulled. The dentist made her sign a waiver, because of the dangers involved. Kathy went into a coma after the procedure and never woke up. My mom

had to live with the truth that she had made the decision that cost Kathy her life.

She undertook heroic feats that she was not qualified for. Driving through the Metropolitan Gorge in Cleveland, the Plymouth stalled and she put us three little kids, all under 9, behind it to push it away from the road railing and the edge of the precipice. Fortunately another driver stopped before kids and car tumbled into the ravine.

Kathy's death trashed our family. My dad took off, and Mary had to work like a pack mule to pay rent and buy groceries. I remember sitting in the back seat, in the dark, on a city street, while she rang doorbells trying to peddle Mutual of Omaha to lousy leads. She was a divorcé before that was common or acceptable. She strove to be respectable, but she was often excluded. She was tremendously devoted to the young girls who worked at the same restaurant, replacements for her daughter. She was a role model, mentor, and second mother to them.

But she could be quite bitter and mean about our dad, who picked up and left for California. She would sometimes lose it and start whaling on us, making us fetch sticks for our own beatings. There is a rule today that you don't badmouth your ex in front of your kids – that rule did not exist then.

In 1965 she remarried, to Dick, her boss, and owner of the restaurant where she worked. Financially, things got better. But Mary continued to struggle inside. She was always sensitive and high-strung. But now she became capricious. She would laugh heartily at a joke, but she could never tell one. She did not want to be a clown. She wanted to be respected. When I was arrested for shoplifting as a teen, she wailed to me: "Must I take you to a psychiatrist?" She probably should have, but the shame of it was unthinkable to her. "How do you think this makes me look?" she cried.

I ran away from home three times, it was so creepy. The last time was in 1967, when I ran off to California, to live the hippie dream. From that point on, we never really got back together. In the 1970s she was diagnosed with diabetes, and it was serious. She became more and more mercurial – family members tiptoed around her, while friends and acquaintances only saw the old Mary – gracious, thoughtful and regal. There were two of her then.

From afar I heard the news, always worse. Dick, the family patriarch, got brain cancer and died. The family businesses promptly failed. The creek beside the house rose and washed away Mary's genealogical and historic paperwork, which was precious to her. Somebody – she suspected a family member – broke into the house and made off with cash, jewelry and other valuables.

She got sicker, to the point she could no longer live in her house. I traveled down from Minnesota and brought her home to live with my family. She had a heart monitor installed. Her feet and legs were black from diabetes. She was showing major signs of dementia. She was paranoid and anxious. Several times she hid money in our house – and then could not find it. She turned against our son Jon in a restaurant once and snapped "Why do you hate me so much?"

The answer is that she terrified him. We got her healthy again, and her blood sugars down. She was well enough to make a trip to see relatives in Kentucky. She taught a great-grandson to read – a great and rewarding achievement. But during the visit she fell and broke a hip. And her medications started to pull her apart.

On the afternoon of St. Patrick's in 2003, she suffered a fourth heart attack. The Kentucky doctors, screwing up her medical records, ignored the DNR note: $Do\ Not\ Resuscitate$. For an hour they shocked her in and out of consciousness.

"They're doing everything they can," her stepdaughter said to her, clasping her hand behind the ER drape.

Mary didn't care. She was sick of everything, and wanted to be with Kathleen again.

"What can they do to me," she said to the ceiling, eyes widening in the fluorescent light, "that they have not already done?"

The Bore Tide At Turnagain Arm, Alaska, And The Erratics Across The Bay

(A bore tide is when the high tide is much, much higher than low tide.

When high tide comes in, thugs go pretty crazy.)

When ocean water comes in, it is too much for the narrow inlet.

It is a river of heaving violence, a river heading inland, instead of out to sea.

It is a tsunami in a teacup.

It is like forcing a baby in a high chair to swallow a whole pot of oatmeal in one gulp.

It is a choking, unacceptable amount of water,

A colliding of worlds, a demolition derby of churning water and wailing wind.

I saw car doors swing violently open, smashing the next car over, yanking passengers out of the cab.

I saw a half pint of blueberry yogurt leap out its container and splatter a man's face

like an act of vengeance.

I saw strong grown men try like mimes to stagger into the wind,

They bent into the force and still were pushed back, posture diagonal, pantlegs flapping furiously,.

And then ...

Twelve hours later...

across the inlet ...

when the tide finally subsides ...

and the terrible winds die down ...

then the estuary bottom reveals the treasure it has been hiding through the night.

Dozens of rocks the size of Econoline vans, almost perfectly cubical in shape,

dry themselves in the late morning sun

These giant cubes look like phylacteries on a devout Jew's head ...

They rise glistening from the sea like square monsters of peace ...

We are erratic, they say, because erratic is how we came to be ...

We were part of a mountain, two miles hence ...

And one day the mountain ejected us, it vomited us out, we were separated forever from our father ...

We flew softly through the sky, Softly, softly, like one hundred ton foam dice ...

like monumental yard gnomes ...

winking underwater ...

and rising again in glory every morning.

Here and gone, here and gone,

Turn again, turn again, world.

2010

Forgiving God

It is the hardest thing to do

because when he effs up it's a doozy.

Of everyone who lets you down,
and that is absolutely everybody,
he lets you down the worst.
He leaves you thinking,
He of all people should have known better.

Our failures cause rear-enders
or make the price of biscuits go up.
His failures twist universes into knots,
He's that bull stumbling into the china shop,
Shearing worlds in two,
and he wears the memory like a wooden plate
tied round his neck with string.
So many plates, so many strings
you can hear him far off, coming.

So how do you go forward when you have all power and he has none?

First appreciate the irony.

Then do the thing he would have done in a more competent age, and set him a task that has nothing to do with you or his most recent error — bring word to me from a long lost friend, let you witness love without being involved. Let you see kindness with your own eyes, love of the variety that smashes rocks on its forehead and contradicts credulity.

And as always, look for the sign of his handiwork, the surprise hitch you could not have included in the instructions, some happy extra thrown on to the job, a coincidence of events, a familiar name inscribed in a letter. Then you know he is on the job and stimulated.

Extract no promises, God has no compass to keep him aright, it is one step at a time for him, the same as me and you.

And start saving, now, for the next big fuck-up, because

God is let loose on the unaware world and anything can happen.

2010

You Should Have Seen Me, Wislawa Szymborska

The reading went OK, but in the last three lines I lost a word.

I was reciting from memory and suddenly I hit a wall.

It was OK, I wasn't too embarrassed,

I just pulled out your poem and read it.

No one said anything.

I'm old, my brain is old, these things will happen.

But oh my darling, you should have seen me that morning, driving down 35E, and nailing those lines at the wheel, and punching the air with my finger, voice rising and roaring.

Then a car drew close in the opposite lane, and a woman your age glanced over at me, waving my fists and shouting in the cab, I maybe looked like a maniac, but not dangerous, and you smiled lovingly, one stranger to another.

Shampoo

When we were little we howled when the stuff got in our eyes
This was before Johnson & Johnson was.

And though mother cupped our brow With the soft of her hand

And pointed to the spider

On the bathroom ceiling

The spider we were to fix our eyes on

Until the rinse washed away the soap --

You couldn't help it, you looked away
And the soap was like daggers
And oh how you cried when it stung

Then one day you discovered You could live with the suds If you simply closed your eyes

Until the foam left your hair

And cheeks and spiraled down the drain

But you had to be willing to do nothing

We need to get word to babies everywhere
Oh stupid little frantic people -Put on the blindfold and see

Worms

You must have a sense of humor when you create three times your body weight in castings every day — The most powerful fertilizer in the known universe — And they are just pink sleeves of flesh turning the stuff out.

Worms have heard every stupid joke about early birds, And they have yet to pretend to be offended by this genocidal cliché. But when we laugh when they are laid out end to end on sidewalks

Like purple meat noodles in the rain, as if that is where they want to be, subject to every shoe and bicycle tire that comes along

When they are just people, like ourselves most days, trying to not drown.

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

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.

Albino Squirrel

He's not pretty.

He looks like he's been stung by hundreds of bees.

There are chunks of him missing,

where birds pecked him and other squirrels attacked.

Of course -- he has no camouflage,

every animal can see him

in the grass, on a branch,

anywhere except on snowy ground

which he tends to sleep through.

He is like a celebrity, every time

he steps out into the world

everything zeroes in on him,

like a bull's-eye, he feels like

he's tap-dancing in the spotlight

every moment of his life

Bald Eagle Spotted on A Round Hay Bale, Near Milaca

See that ripped young bird test his talons on the twine.

He could fly off with it all for a nest,
then shower the world with his droppings.

See how full of himself he is!

White on top, brown below -the perfect symbol of America.

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.

The Holidays

I saw Mommie kissing Santa Claus underneath the Christmas tree. Fifty seven years later I still need therapy.

You Could Tell He Was a Good Dog

Utility truck in the middle of St. Clair, yellow lights blinking.
Stealing around, I see the dead dog lying in the street, a basset mix perhaps, an older fellow, white and black and brown, and those infinite ears folded against the blacktop.

Further down, an older woman, perhaps 75, is stopped in her blue Ford Focus, staring over her steeling wheel with open mouth.

In the rear view I see two men in safety vests lift the animal by his hands and feet and set him on the tailgate, and I think how I would not want to have their job.

Stone in the Shoe

I remember, as a boy, reading that the saints sometimes put stones in their sandals, and walked all day that way,

not limping, not avoiding the stone,
and certainly not bellyaching about it,
because that wouldn't be the kind of person they were.
I left my house on Park Avenue
with a stone the size of a BB,
made almost to the top of the Lynn Road hill,
but I could feel the world not becoming a better place.
I hunkered down in the slush and gravel,
the seat of my pants getting cold and wet,
undoing my shoe, and shook my sock
till the pebble tumbled out
like the stone rolled away from the tomb,
and continued my way to St. Joseph's.

The Man Who Liked To Read

He reads in bed knowing it might be his last day.

He wishes he had started the book earlier,
when he feels Death grab him by the ankles and pull.
He reads now as if he had studied under Evelyn Wood,
skimming over a sentence a second, racing through
words,

yet with a remarkable degree of retention.

He shudders, he shakes, he tears pages out with his teeth.

he has to make it to the final page to find out how it ends.

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.

Complex Relationship

My dog Beau killed several young ones in his time -a young woodchuck crossing a culvert
a kitten yanked from its nursing basket,
a baby raccoon with sweet bandit markings
stolen from its burrow alongside the river,
he shook them twice and the pretty forms were stilled,
and I mourned my responsibility for the deaths.
Now Beau is gone and I miss him terribly,
thoughtless murderer and all.

Frowning Woman On Bus Bench

And in her arm a hardback book with the title 'Misgivings.'

Are You Like Me?

You don't trust yourself
to hold your keys
over the storm drain,
because an essential part of you
is sure to let them fall?

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.

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?"

That Morning in Vienna

You may know that I am zero degrees of separation from Charles Manson. I met him, I'm fairly sure, in Twenty-Nine Palms, California, in the Mojave Desert, in 1968. I'm not one hundred percent sure because it's not like he showed me his ID – I just remembered the face later, when he became famous.

But this story from the 1970s may be wilder than that one. I am one degree of separation from Adolf Hitler.

The story involves a prop comedian came on named Alan Brookins-Brown, about 65. Brookins-Brown performs in the '70s with a different object every night, like a length of PVC pipe, which he improvises a lesson around. The act is both silly and brilliant.

After he finishes, my friend Barry invites him to have dessert with us. Alan is hungry but not talked out, by a long shot.

"Alan, tell Mike about the Anschluss."

"Oh, yes, my meeting with Hitler."

Brookins-Brown told a story he had told a thousand times. "I'm British, you know, and as a child I was a

prodigy violinist. I was invited to perform recitals and do pieces with various orchestras in Europe. Many people in the business looked at me being the next really big thing -- maybe.

"So I was performing with the Vienna Philharmonic in March of 1938, under Maestro Clemens Krause. I was nine years old. I traveled with my mother, but this one morning I got away from her, and began running through the Hotel Imperial. I was cooped up the whole day before, practicing, and I wanted to let loose. This restlessness was unusual in a concert violinist,

"I found an empty elevator car, and began pushing all the buttons. The car went all the way up to the sixth floor, slowly, and then all the way to the basement, one floor at a time. When I got halfway down, I pushed all the buttons again. It was an agony of slowness!

"What I did not know was that our hotel was the hotel chosen for the president of Austria to welcome Chancellor Hitler, on that very day, and that the Fuhrer's entire entourage, along with Austrian cabinet members, were waiting in the lobby on the first floor for the elevator to take them to the balcony on the third floor, where Hitler would deliver an address to throngs of people.

"A mob of journalists were queuing with Hitler and the other dignitaries, all of them waiting for the elevator door to open. The diplomats were swallowing hard, worrying that Hitler would perceive the elevator's erratic operation as a joke at his expense – an incident of national mischief, and who knows what might happen then.

"Finally I landed on the first floor, and the scissor gate swung open and I looked up at the gleaming black leather longcoat of Herr Hitler, arms folded and a look of considerable vexation on his features.

"I knew who he was. I began to cry. Hitler's eyes were twitching. He was clearly furious at my behavior, and wished he could squash me like he would eventually squash the entire world. He looked like he desperately needed to do exactly that, squash me like a snail.

"But he couldn't do that, surrounded by statesmen, officers, and members of the press. Instead he smiled and I thought, 'He doesn't look like Chalice Chaplin, really. He reminds me more of Oliver Hardy. Hitler was an evil Oliver Hardy."

"In a sudden motion, Hitler swept me up in his arms and kissed the tears from my cheeks, and turned and laughed for the photographers, who snapped us.

"I saw Adolph Hitler laugh," said Alan Brookins-Brown.
"He held me in his arms and he laughed."

The story was over. But I needed to know more. "So—why are you an improv comedian in Minneapolis?"

"Ah," he said, "the music was too much for me. I was already tiring of it, and the constant work and need for perfection. And something about looking up close into Hitler's eyes -- the hunger I saw there, and the miserableness -- made me think, playing the violin isn't everything. I didn't need to conquer the world.

"And I'll tell you something else. Staring into Hitler's eyes, and living to tell the tale, I started to think life was too wonderful to work so hard. I am a dishwasher now, for Dudley. I love the sink and the sound of people laughing. I have a cat.

"I am happy. Hitler is not."

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 caterpilar 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-pollinization.

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!

The Murdered Reader

In a proper poem something changes.

The reader thinks of something he never thought of before,

or he remembers something that was long forgotten, or he decides, god damn it, I'm not going to think that way ever again.

A proper poem murders the reader.

Brain cells re-bootstrap and learn.

The old reader goes into the dumpster,

the new one grabs the baton.

It doesn't have to be anything major.

A crumb on the collar that needs brushing off, will do.

A good one and the reader will be packing his bags for Bolivia.

Because something has been added.

The old ways have been found wanting.

The murdered reader is set ablaze.

The old task completed, the new hands slap off the dust and move on.

Neighborhood Watch Meeting

We gathered to discuss unruly behavior at the student house.

"They wake me up in the dead of night, slamming their car doors," said Fred Myers. "I can't get back to sleep."

"They sit up on their porch roof and smoke reefer and laugh," said Joe Peebles.

"Martha Peterson saw two young men urinating on her hedge," a woman said. She whispered the word urinating.

"I found this used condom on the sidewalk the night of Homecoming," the widower in the gray house said. He drew a Ziplock bag from his jacket pocket, and there was the matted, used thing.

"Dear God," said Mrs. Graves, of the red brick house with the climbing ivy and award-winning roses.

Don't Put It Off

The future site of rippling mountains ...
The future site of reptile swamps ...
The future site of stinging birds ...
Minnesota -- enjoy it today!

1976

Palp

The palp in a clam is not that footy thing that looks like a tongue but is not, it's the rubbery flaps that guide food into the bivalve's mouth. Whereas, palpate is the the art of understanding the body without opening it up with a saw, you do it with pushing and knocking with knuckles.

Palpatine is the emperor in Star Wars who made electric shoot from his hands.

Palpitations are when the heartbeat skips,

you can sitting there reading the paper

and then there's this rhythm vibrating inside you, falling down the stairs, head over heels.

All are reminders we are made out of body,

Every muscle connected to our brains,

Going about our daily business,

so close every moment

is palpable.

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Reply To The Poetry Editor From Mary Ambrose Culbertson, of Fort Collins ~ A Poet Scorned

I hope you die today.
I hope it hurts a lot.
I hope your gut splits open
And your insides tumble out.

The fight goes not to the good,
Nor does the race go to the swift.
But let your last realization be
who it was you messed with.

Harbinger

One day during our courtship Rachel heard music on my stereo --

it was Lou Reed, whom I had followed for years.

"Why do you get out of him?" she asked me.

"He's just seems like some kind of sick show-off."

I prepared a defense in my mind,
about Reed being a voice from the dark side of life,
an ugly demeanor masking a gooey inside,
an antidote for the Aquarian ethic,
plus he had that chunky guitar thing going.
But in fact, I recognized her truth, Lou Reed was a sick show-off.

Everything else he might be, he definitely was that.

She stepped into the bathroom and turned on the tap.

I slumped in my chair, and wondered what else the future had in store.

Are You A Lover Of Poetry?

There probably is something wrong with you.

You have an appetite for grandiosity,

Or everything has to sound pretty to you,

Or you suffer from a profound fear of reality.

Your sense of self has been splintered

and you dwell in a solipsistic place,

making up your life on the fly.

Perhaps you are afraid of confrontation

and so you seek retribution on the page.

Or your anger at the world's injustice

has taken you to a place where

you need to be alone a lot, to smolder by yourself.

Or your attention span is not what it might be —

What kind of spider is that on your sweater?

Along I-494

Weeds grow through cracks in the sidewalk leading up to the apartment complex, past the burnt lawn.

An iron banister is rusted at the base, and leans loosely.

The door window is taped over, covering up what looks like a bullet hole.

Char marks on the stucco show where the fire leaped out.

And over the doorway the sign:

Heritage Square.

Hitting Bottom (October 4, 2008)

Depressed.

Out of work.

World at war.

Mortgage underwater.

Savings account depleted.

So I call the mental health 800 number

to discover it has been outsourced to Kuwait.

I admit to the guy that I was contemplating the end.

Guy pauses a moment before asking me --

Can you drive a truck?

Tony DiNapoli

Tony worked the graveyard shift with me at Southern New England Typesetting, in Hammond, Connecticut. We were proofreaders. This was in 1980. If you have worked the graveyard shift -- anywhere, from a taxi company to a security outfit -- you know it attracts weird people. We were all shipwrecked, obsessive, on the lam.

And then there was Tony DiNapoli, maybe 65, without lines on his face, a man incapable of saying one negative thing. He spoke in a yearning, soft voice. We were unaware of him ever actually doing a good thing, like delivering meals on wheels. But he had this monk-like demeanor.

Tony was a good son, a mama's man, still living with her, and rushing home at 7 AM for the scrambled eggs she fixed for him.

He wore prescription glasses he got from a tray of used glasses at Volunteers for America. Dead people's glasses. He plucked a pair from a big tangled pile, and somehow they were good enough for him to read small-print galleys by.

He was a child in some way, intelligent enough but not very well informed. He walked a mile to work every day, even in icy weather. He didn't know good politics from bad politics. Everyone was doing his best, in his view. He was amazed by ordinary things, like a patch of marigolds he saw encircling a telephone pole just outside the door, or how odd it was that electricity worked.

He always had a good word for everyone, even Walter, the scowling shift foreman who dumped new galleys in our wire basket every few minutes. The rest of us shot Walter nasty looks. Tony said, "Thank you, Walter. I'm just about finished with the last batch!" And he smiled like he had just won the Lotto.

A running gag of the rest of us was to make fun of his nearly daily observation about a clerk at the 7-Eleven on Hartford Avenue or some other place. Every day he would stop to buy some packaged sweet, a granola bar or Ho-Ho. And he told us about it every night, in excruciating detail. And it was always the same story:

"It was a young woman I told you about. Her name badge said Cara. I think she might be Puerto Rican. She had curly hair and dimples on her cheeks. And when I handed her my money, she gave me the biggest smile."

Oh, we teased him about the crushes he had on convenience store clerks. They always had the biggest

smile. "Like roses -- like a bouquet of roses." The other old proofreaders teased him the most. Tony was living in a dream world. They weren't mean, but there was something about his sunny, pathetic outlook, and the dead person's spectacles attached to his face that people just wanted to hurt, just a little bit, to let him know what a freak he was compared to their wonderful third-shift lives.

I say this because it is 37 years later, and I just bought a cup of coffee at Super America, and a cup of low-cal raspberry yogurt. And as I slid my credit card through the reader, I looked up at the girl at the cash register. She was 19, not a ravishing beauty, but strong somehow, working in this tough joint through the wee hours. She had dyed red hair, and wore a green nosethingie, and she gave me the biggest smile.

The Not So Well-Tempered Autoclavier

In 1970 I worked as a sanitary engineer at U of M Hospitals – the graveyard shift. This was before the dawn of disposable medical waste, except syringes, which were coming on strong. In those days we cleaned stuff up as best we could and sent it back to the front.

I was in charge of cleaning all the pots and pumps and isolettes and other medical devices that had been used that day. I cleaned things that then went into the autoclave.

There was a lot of DNA in this work. Glass bottles filled with pee, surgical instruments with human stuff still stuck to them.

I ran the hospital autoclave, steam cleaning all the stainless equipment, making them ready for that day's procedures.

It was gruesome work but people left me alone – guess why – and I listened to the radio. It was the beginning of the talk show era.

I had one friend, Meritt Schueneman, the night orderly. Meritt was a classic third shift guy -- a Bach scholar who couldn't read or play music, but who claimed to have read over a hundred biographies of Bach. I believed him.

Meritt would drop by around 3:20, and we would sneak off to the morgue and smoke a joint. Meritt was so bad. One winter night he took a tray of frozen stuff -- intestines, they looked like -- stepped outside the door and hurled it, discus-style, into the frozen Mississippi. People who say pot is harmless often fail to consider the terrible things people do as a joke, because they are high, and have read too many biographies of great composers.

One night I was taking out the day's disposable syringes. This was before they developed sharps procedures to protect against needles and scalpels. I had a white plastic bag, filled with about 400 needles. These needles were used for every kind of injection and blood test that day. My task was to take them to the hospital's furnace -- the blaster that burned amputated body parts and other hospital waste, down the hall.

I approached the swinging door, holding the bag of needles in front of me. Then the unlikely thing happened. Another human being, in our deep medical dungeon, so early in the morning, pushed the door open from the other side. The bag was pushed into my body, and at least 30 of the needles poked through my shirt and pricked the skin of my chest and belly.

I looked at the nurse. She looked at me, and put her hand over her mouth.

Blood was dripping from all 30 holes. I made my way to the security office. They gave me two aspirin. I had to wait in the security office for an hour until an HR person arrived. She also was untrained for this kind of emergency.

I walked home, 30 scabs drying on my body. I climbed into bed, wondering if I would wake up. I did, about thirteen hours later, still woozy from all the medicine and protein I had been injected with. And made myself a sandwich and returned to work.

Saturday Morning on Dayton Avenue

The two Jehovah's Witnesses came to the house on the corner, a group home for mentally retarded adults. One of them walked in an uneven gait -- sore hip.

They greeted the man rocking vigorously on the porch glider.

"We'd like to come in for a moment to talk about Jesus," the older of the two women said.

The retarded man pumped a fist into the air. "Jesus!" he cried. "Jesus! Jesus!"

The women smiled. "You are familiar with our precious savior, sir?"

"You're from Jesus," the man anwered hopefully. Then he called up the stairs at the top of his voice: "Carla! There are colored women!"

"Yes, and we would like to discuss God's plan for you, and the eternal life he has prepared for you."

The other woman clasped her hand and shook her off. This house was a dry hole.

Walking down the sidewalk, they wondered if they had done the right thing.

"Everyone needs Jesus," one said.

"But we should probably get permission," said the one that limped. "Even then, I'm not sure how we'd go about it."

Behind them they heard the man singing at the top of his voice: "Jee-sus! Jee-sus!!"

"But what if that man dies not knowing God?"

"He seems to have the gist of it."

She

She was a secret claustrophobe.

She never came out of the closet.

The Rights of Consumers

Cancer has the right to replicate.

Fire has the right to burn.

War, the right to reduce us to rubble

As we have the right to mourn.

Instructions for Falling

We have to let go in order to fall

And the steady tumble that carries us down

Surrender all order, unclench every hand

Until we are sleeping, and begin again

Lesson

There are people who have not been held in twenty years.

Understandably they are easily reduced to tears.

If one were just to see them and press close

All the built-up aching inside explodes.

Why can't the wounded have what the rest have?

It's because heartache is unattractive.

Big Gulp

Could 7-Eleven have chosen

a more degrading name, one making us sound as sentient as a toilet, a swallower of commodities, a flusher of calories.

I read that a farmer in LeMars, Iowa,

fed his cattle expired ice cream from the Schwan's plant there,

great troughs of cookie dough vanilla and chocolate mint

disappearing into labyrinthine stomachs,

it feels as if our politics are retarded, we have no more way

to elect ourselves out of this maze

than the cows do, the free market is a confinement facility,

and we are the herd shut up in the meat factory, and by and by we buy and buy,

hoping for something, for the conviction that we will be OK,

sucking down corn solids in the feedlot of America, we are not citizens, we're livestock and democracy is such a crock, we get lost in the indifference, if not for you, there but for you, the exception is you and the intelligence you honor me with, the wonderful gift, the seeing of me, the seeing that I am not a callus of tissue, not a yard of tillage, I am a man with thumping heart, I know we fight sometimes but forget about that, because you are all I have to make me feel known, a person, not another cart at the register, the moo cow returning to kneel at your manger, burping vanilla and stamping my hoofs to say thank you.

Pruning

A man was pulled in so many directions his body began to come apart.

First one arm left him, plucked from its socket, then a leg, and then the other arm and leg.

For a moment he exulted in the fact he had nothing left to lose.

I am a free agent in the universe! he said,
Then felt the vice grips on his nose.

Talking Dog Poem

I asked my dog,
why must you wolf down your food?
Without looking back, he gulped,
"Sorry -- I'm late for a nap."

Bricks

My wife's mother was born on the grounds of an insane asylum in Hastings, Nebraska. Its original name was The Nebraska Asylum for the Insane, later the Ingleside Hospital for the Insane. Her father -- my wife's mother's father -- was head of maintenance for the facility. Today it is more of a day-patient mental health clinic, but back in the day it was a place to store people who acted strange, who made people feel uncomfortable, who might have been a danger to themselves or others.

Rachel and I walked the grounds for a couple hours. Many of the buildings were due to be torn down. We followed a dirt path to a meadow where we saw, hiding in the tall grass, about 200 bricks embedded intermittently in the soil. Each brick had a number on it -- 212, 41, 174, etc., in no order.

We finally figured out that these were grave markers, markers with numbers instead of names. The numbers were the number of patient's medical records. First the hospital took away these people's freedom, and then they took away their identities.

Can you imagine all that remains of you is a number on a brick?

Then we thought more. It wasn't the institution that was being cruel. The policy was instituted to protect the families of the inmates -- that having names on the markers would be trackable, would reflect badly on them. Families did not want to be traced back, for people to know they brought their sons and daughters to such a place and left them there forever.

Now, just a field with bricks embedded in the dirt, and numbers scratched on every brick.

The Disappeareds

Commissioned by What's Left: The Suicide Project, 2016

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.

Be Like Lions

I wanted my kids to be like lions -indomitable, lazy,
supine on the plain,
purring like thunder
sliced up by propellers,
announcing unmistakably
to the stammering world,
We are the terminus of the food chain.
We absorb all your poison
and shit out your bones.

New Friend, 1975

(I wrote this a few weeks after first meeting Rachel) in midmay the springtime stops holding its breath the trees light up like fireworks of green the screen doors slam like the first time ever winter was hard, the car

got crashed, 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

The Man Who Thrived on Rejection

A man went up to a table and said to the diner,

"Your scampi looks delicious. Would you mind if I had a taste?"

"Under no circumstances," the diner replied and sent the man away.

The man passed a note to the teller in the bank:

"Would you please place \$20,000 in this bag?"

The teller consulted with a supervisor, who politely declined

but invited him to set up a personal account.

The man approached a beautiful woman and plead with her:

"Have sex with me and bear my child!"

The woman took her boyfriend's arm and scurried away.

The man saved all these refusals in a cardboard box that he kept on top of the refrigerator.

The Year We Ruined Christmas

My brother and I were nine and seven.

We got the Christmas thing,

but we were still excited about presents.

It's 7 AM and we see the tree and everything below.

We proceed to our parents' bedroom and ask the people sleeping there if we can organize the presents.

I think we meant, separate them into piles according to recipient,

but once we had permission we went ape and unwrapped every gift

and just to show how organized we were we took all the labels and cards attached and put them in a basket.

Walking to mass in our dress shoes across snowy yards,
I tried to put our shame in perspective.

"We asked if we could organize, and they said yes," I said.

"Don't they know what organize means?"

The New Model Francis

I greet the birds in the spirit of lovingkindness.

I expect them to perch on my finger

[&]quot;With every rejection I grow stronger," he said.

[&]quot;Every time they say no I see farther."

[&]quot;Shut up," my brother said.

and chirp hymns to me of God.

Instead they take wing at my approach.

Probably it's the lit cigarette.

Dime

One day I learned

I was wrong all my life, offended by lightness and wary of cheer. The only music my ear respected was the groan of the soon-to-be dead. Then did I see how far down mountain I was, and what hard climb lay ahead. In what spirit does one undertake such a journey -with indivisible purpose? And towering fanfare? Or better, set foot as if nothing were certain, as if birds migrating are off on a whim, and matters of life and excruciating death are resolved with the flip of a coin.

Underwater

Why do horses run back into barns that are burning? That is today's lesson for learning.

It's an instinct to seek out the familiar

Even when conditions take a turn for the worst.

The abused wife, the addict, the man tearing stubs in half at the track.

He looks at the window and heads back.

It's an investment once made that we can't walk away from, even when the house we bought with our blood is sinking into the blue of the bay.

Addressing the Lit Stick of Dynamite Problem

It's hard to know exactly what to do.

You have just lit the fuse and it is sparking away.

Someone approaches and asks what you are doing.

Some people freak out at that point and hurl the thing,

and when it goes off, act amazed,

hoping no one saw you throw it.

But did you throw it at the bank building wall,

or did you misdirect people by heaving it in a random direction,

toward the preschool playground, for instance?

When a cop asks what you've got there in your hand,

explain that you are in the mining, quarrying,

construction, or demolition industries, your pick,

and you are on your way to a continuing education class

and you are running just a titch late.

Some try to snuff the fuse by spitting on their fingers and pinching the progress of the burning to a nub.

Or they yank the lit fuse from the stick and hope the violence does not trigger detonation.

Maybe it is not too late to style yourself as a simple lover of God

and make everyone around you think real hard about that,

and allow you your personal space.

Better that than people learning your true purpose, that someone asked you to hold this for them, And being a nice person and despite posted warnings,

Oh, the sweating tension we live out our lives in, Framed by this constant hissing sound.

Conformance To Specs

you accepted the gift.

I didn't want to be there
but I knew I couldn't leave
so I painted eyes on my eyelids,
for when I attended meetings.
People seemed reassured by this -by the clamshell sclera, tea-leaf iris
and that amazingly attentive expression.
"We're finally getting through to him,"
they said,
but I was gone.

The Man Who Didn't Get It

There was a man who was tormented by angels, who caused his body to revolt against him.

They made his hair fall out, and he laughed.

"Look, my head is round, like the earth I live on," he said.

They made his eyesight weak. and he laughed again.

"There are so many games you can play blind!"

They caused the cells in his body to go mad.

"Connect the bumps, and you make constellations!" he shouted.

"I believe I am on a pathway to remarkable growth! The doctor informed me that I'm positive!" Which was very frustrating to the tormenting angels.

"We're just not getting through to this guy," they said.

Cleaning The Cans Behind The Steak House Belonging To Dick Konik, Whom My Mother Later Married, Vermilion, 1962

I was eleven, but all winter I did a man's job holding back the nightly tide of plates and cups, my apron pollocked with every kind of sauce and smear.

My mom, who waitressed there, got me the job, she looked in on me at the sink from time to time, directing hot spray toward the soaking pots.

In springtime I took to the grass by the dumpster barrels,

assigned the task of scraping off the goo of decayed food

that had built up since the previous summer.

When the garbage truck comes to take away the trash, and the barrels are tipped, a lot tumbles out

but a significant volume of crud adheres to the lining.

Potatoes and toast points, pasta and french fries, liver and lettuce

from a thousand side salads diners didn't finish, a bottle of dish detergent hooked up to a rubber hose.

I stood my ground, I scraped out the cans -- you might not want

to eat out of one afterward, but still they were impressive,

and I stood atop a heap of ooze, the conqueror of every fear.

In Defense Of Self Pity

It is never in favor to feel sorry for oneself, but I offer this meek refutation.

I was driving on Cedar Lake Road in 1977.

Life was good, I had a pretty girlfriend and a job.

I was a published writer with a dog.

But then I felt the building of tears inside me,

they erupted and stumbled down my shirt.

It was the realization that, lucky as I was,

I wasn't ever going to be great.

Not untalented but lots of gaps in character and resources.

My work was lazy and slipshod at times,

I lacked the follow-through to make that perfect draft,

I had a disturbing propensity for the dark and obscure,

a guy without pedigree, sprung from ordinary places,

already too damaged in life to make it big,

I would just go on being this guy in the mirror

with the premature crows-feet by his eyes.

I pulled the car over and wiped my face
and felt in that moment a kind of affection for myself
I don't recall feeling ever again, admiration for going
forward,

acceptance of the blessings that came my way, even if I never lit up the sky, maybe I could still be a decent man, or a dad.

A Solution For America

America is troubled by two demographics -the number of people who have given up on life and those who are yearning for someone to kill.

We are proposing the creation of a Strategic Despair Reserve,

a list of people who would rather die than live -the depressed, the defeated, the terminally ill, the
afraid --

coupled with a list of people who feel compelled to kill people --

the deranged, the furious, the disturbed.

Each side in the SDR solves the other side's problem.

Second Amendment types need no longer open fire on schoolchildren

as there are adults happy to take their place -no need to commit suicide afterwards,
as they are given a free pass by the law.
And those who have lost all hope in this country
can make their exit walking down the street,

lowering the shades on the Great Experiment.

Do You Know What A Buck Does To Does?

Promise you won't desert me in the desert.

Because I am too close to the canyon to close it.

Shot at, the dove dove into the bushes.

The bloody bandage was wound around my wound.

After a number of injections the member got number.

How I would lead if I just got the lead out.

It being spring, I will teach my sow to sow.

When I Am Gone

I always tell the dog I'm coming back.

But why do I leave a roast chicken on the counter?

The dog knows it is for dinner.

She knows she'll even get a piece of breast.

But dogs' brains have tiny temporal lobes

so a bit of time can seem a lot to them.

The first hour she was good, saying no

to the chickeny smell, the delicious bones and gravy.

But in the second hour she is overcome,

she is salivating but also forlorn because

I am gone so long, I am obviously dead,

and mustn't she keep up her strength?

Big Leg Girl

Waiting at the intersection, Max noticed a girl, perhaps 16, stumbling across the street.

"You know," he said, "I have never understood why people with obvious weight problems don't simply exercise and eat less."

"Maybe she's got mental problems," Perry said. "Maybe she is depressed. Maybe she has a circulatory disorder.

"Maybe she's lived her whole life in foster homes. Maybe she was a victim of sexual abuse, or was bullied in school."

Max turned to Perry.

"Oh, you're so compassionate."

Jesus Has a Lot To Answer For

In the Bible he says Ask and it shall be given to you, Knock, and it shall be opened to you.

And so people have been knocking and asking for a very long time.

Please save my child from addiction, from disease,

From kidnapping and dying, Lord we pray.

Of course, only a small fraction experience divine intervention,

I would say maybe twenty percent at the most, and what is He to do if the tornado is bearing down on a playground,

hip-check and ricochet it to another town?

So the eighty percent are right to say, Dear Savior,

it says here, Ask and it shall be given to you.

It doesn't say, Ask and I'll get back to you with my decision,

This is a promise of delivery, an explicit warranty with zero wiggle room.

So what do You have to say about that?

And Jesus will say, Well, we were perhaps a little casual with the language.

which I still maintain is true in a technical sense,

but you may perhaps need to hear the explanation from a trained theologian,

they are good at unpacking concepts that appear to be obvious.

Think of the whole asking process as a kind a lottery. So the parents whose children died in their arms, whose reasons for living melted away like snow,

the parents of these lifeless children look to Jesus and they say,

Why, you mother effing liar.

Two Old Men

When I go these days I really have to go.

I was driving the River Road where Highland ends.

I parked the car and danced behind a wall to find relief, just as an older man from the high-rise crossed the street

to take his evening walk.

As I stepped out from behind the wall we nearly collided.

"Good Christ," he shouted, grabbing his chest.

"I thought you were about to attack me."

"No, no," I said. "I was just taking a leak."

"I had heart surgery just a few weeks ago," the old man said.

"I wasn't going to kill you," I said. "I just had to go."

Most Dogs Are Good Dogs

It's an odd one that lies around thinking of ways to undo you.

They want a good relationship, they want to get along,

they want to master, to the degree they can figure them out,

the things you expect them to do.

There are vicious dogs, but they are usually doing what they are trained to do -

i.e., they are being good, after a fashion.

And there are mad dogs, made that way by inconceivable torment,

and God knows they cannot help being that way.

When they trash the couch, pulling all the fluff out and onto the carpet, they are not intending to trash your dreams,

it was just an odd thought that stole over them, and even when they have a clear grievance, and are reminded then of their carnivore origins, they can be dissuaded with a pat to the head or a reassuring word.

The Not Very Good Best Poem

His language wasn't great and he read his rhyme in a singsong way,

but what worked was that the poem was important to him.

It was about a colleague at work named Kerrie that he had a crush on.

He saw her every day, and over the months her kindness

and her smile and her pretty face were like steak knives planted deep in his chest.

He was so in love, he was in that place where she was the one,

and every time she spoke to him she hollowed him out, scraped empty by her goodness and abashed by her beauty.

But Kerrie was married and seemed happy being that way.

What could he offer but his ugly face and stupid future?
He read his poem and sat down, and it was clear
the poem only deepened his despair.

How could he go forward, his seed would not find purchase

in the only woman he loved, it was like dying, it was dying,

his hopes were Osterized, his future disappeared, he envisioned a walk-up apartment and pee-stained underpants,

and he still had to work with her every single day, yet I was more moved

by the poem he read than any other reader's.

My Vision

It must have been on my mind subconsciously because my dream lasted for hours, with the lava flows, houses splintering, horned reptiles roaming the streets, snatching up nonbelievers and disposing of them.

But death itself was not so bad.

It reminded me of getting beamed up
by the transporter in Star Trek -you start to darken, like a banana going bad,
and then, without pain, you are
ushered into the other side.

It was not vouchsafed to me to behold the entire vision, and what lay on the other side,

but who cares -- it didn't hurt.

And I had run the good race, at a sustainable pace and now I was one with the elect.

I could not help thinking of the people who knew me in life.

the ones who reliably picked up their dog's poop and wrote generous checks to 501(3)c organizations, to see me getting the free pass like this and thinking, You've got to be kidding.

The Suffering Neighbor

The stresses of everyday life were more stressful for her.

She was an ardent believer, and wanted you to believe, too,

so that you could be happy, never mind that she was seldom happy.

The world wanted in, and she wanted to keep it out, so that she peered through the drapes at the teenagers walking by,

the ones with the crazy hair and safety pins, and cautioned her children

against the wrong kind of company.

In her distress she made terrible mistakes,

as the time she invited

the couple next door to a free screening at the college, hoping to be best friends with them, and have them join her church.

But the movie turned out to be full of naked people and she slumped in her folding chair, another opportunity to serve others destroyed. Her teenaged son smoked pot, so she had him remanded

to a tough-love logging ranch in western Montana, she turned in her own son to the cops,

and he never came home.

She showed up at our doorway five years ago,

tears running down her cheeks, somehow she did not

learn of our daughter's death until eleven months after the fact, and she poured through the doorway,

sobbing and shaking, apologizing for not knowing,

but even then not calculating that such a visit only stirred

sad thoughts in us.

But we took her in and made her tea, sometimes that's how it works.

So when we learned a week late that they found her dead in bed

at the age of 56, we grieved for her, who suffered so much

and wrung her hands, and praised God and knotted her hanky.

Thank you, Mabel, for doing your best, even when your best was not so good.

Chichicastenango

On Sundays in Chichi the vendors set up early, loading booths and tables with weavings, flowers, pottery,

candles, and medicinal plants.

Already the censer girl is swinging the can on the cathedral portico,

perfumed smoke filling the square.

An American lady rose early to snap the proceedings.

The vendors wave her away, unless she wants to tip them.

She comes to a lean-to where an old woman is fastening masks

to a woven background.

The masks are the faces of Mayan gods, some of them demons,

there is even one of Porfirio Diaz.

The tourist lady lifts her camera and presses the shutter.

The old woman turns and screams in Quiche, scolding the lady.

It seems that in Chichicastenago it is extremely poor form to photograph

any artisanal works, because they took so long to make, and because the time spend making them puts spirit into them --

and now, in an eighteenth of a second, the click of a Nikon,

all the spirits from an entire year of work flee from the masks.

They are empty now, they are merely representations.

The old woman glares with hatred in her eyes.

The greedy American has stolen everything, and not shelled out a single centavo.

The Weeping Man

I came upon a weeping man and I knelt to offer assistance.

What is it, I asked him, that has brought you to this point?

I am the lowest of men, he sobbed.

No forgiveness, no restitution. I have failed at everything.

Come on, friend, I said, it can't be all that bad.

Why, look at me, I have my faults and failures but see how I soldier on?

The man pulled away from my grasp.

I may be down on my luck, he said, but that's no reason to insult me.

I Saw Jesus In The Wintry Swamp

God never spoke to me, but he appeared to me once.

I was tramping through an icy marsh alongside the Minnesota

River.

I heard a crackling sound, like something coming toward me,

and there was Jesus.

Only, it wasn't the usual Jesus.

He was a monster, twelve feet tall, and somehow he had

blended into

the wood of his own cross.

He was naked, and his skin was like the bark of a tree.

His face had whorls and knotholes like you see in plywood.

Twigs and shoots sprouted out of him everywhere.

I stepped back with my dog, both of us terrified.

Jesus continued to advance, plodding, dragging a train of brush

and roots.

You could see it was hard slogging all that vegetation through

the snow.

I called out to him, "Jesus, how did you turn into a tree?"

He attempted to speak, he opened his mouth, but all that came out of him was dried leaves and sawdust.

Then I realized he had descended into hell,

And if they got him, what chance did the rest of us have?

Valentine

Write the poem in your heart
Make a wish with both eyes closed
Say the things that needed saying
Undermine the status quo
And if you doubt me, don't –
I am standing here for you
Please take down this number
You will know what you must do
Tell the truth with one hand raised
Make a promise to the earth
Say a prayer for all who suffer
Pull the arrow from your heart

The Lake

If you swim in the lake you know the feeling,

That something in the water has draped itself on you.

Kids race back to the beach with ropes of plant hanging on them,

alarmed that something scratchy was trying to get them.

Fishermen hate that it hangs on the lines.

Boats hate that it clogs the propeller and requires meticulous picking away of plant before entering a new lake.

Some towns bought advanced dredging operations

Costing millions of dollars to cull the water milfoil from the waters,

To keep campers and vacationers coming to their lakes and buying from their grocery stores.

Towns would remove a hundred tons of plant per season,

only to have algae take over the deoxygenated water.

"This used to be a really nice lake," said Barbara Olafson in her back yard overlooking the lake, over lemonade.

"But there got to be too many of us."

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.

Vade Mecum

Vaderi, valdera -- valder ah ha ha! All animosity between us has passed. The war that caused so many tears has been put to bed, there is no acrimony remaining in the air.

Should you take bread from my knapsack
I do not begrudge it,
Instead I offer you more.
I know you need to maintain your strength.
Here, I say, or here, you say, take more, be filled.
Even when we pretend to quarrel
it is just a play we are playing in,
and then we stop, put hands to hips
and laugh most heartily.

We hike through the highlands pointing out every bird,
and imitate its walk and call.

And when our pikestaffs direct us back to town,
the church bells peal and people part
to let the happy wanderers through.

Beheaded

The word has been undermined so you automatically think of axes and mattocks and stained chopping blocks, when it should be a term of approval, as in "That is one well-beheaded young man, and he will go places," or,

"Her beauty was beheaded with a diadem of roses that pulsed with fragrance in the dying light,"

or for use in a vow when it must be especially clear what we intend, as in "I'll beheaded home soon to you, love."

Demon In The Grasp

I see you dancing across Fairview Avenue, two doors from the Mall of St. Paul.
I nab you by the collar and confront you:
Why must you gad about tying men's tongues so all they can say is Ah! Ah!
What purpose does the sale of beauty serve and who sent you here to destroy us?
The demon squirmed in my grasp, unrepentant, and then went slack, and confessed:
"We're trying to get you to think."

Take Your Dog To Work Day

It started badly, with snarling in the ramp.

By breaktime chewed-up paper was everywhere,
and spots spreading on the wall-to-wall carpeting.

My supervisor wants to know where the data
from the Jenkins account is.

My dog knows that tone.

She knows the cubicle is just a crate,
and I am brought to heel the same as her.

We drive home in silence, but the pity
she feels for me is palpable.

The Way Of Men

Men lay their sins at your feet as if they are proud of them.

I killed for you.

I stole an infant from its mother.

I am mighty like the monkey on the roof.

And when I have expressed myself, and it won't take me the whole day,

I will bind you to the maple tree with rope so that nobody takes you while I doze.

Unspeakable Love

I hear you crunching on skeleton in the next room.

What bargain have I made to bed down with a boneeater.

This is ungodly, a disgrace to the sacred -your hairy naked body on the floor,
the lolling tongue, the refusal to learn to speak a single
word.

We are embarked on a course of utter damnation.

You being of another species entirely, me betrothed and assigning you my personal space.

I was given to you by pagan machinations, a transfer of alien affections -- I bow and place the meat inside your maw.

Visitation Weekend ~ Man With Three Daughters, Stopping to Pee at the Annandale/Clearwater Exit on I-94 Three daughters under age 5, and he has to get them from the double door of the gas station to the car by the

pumps.

The oldest child capably leads the way.

The man follows, with the infant in a Snuggli.

The middle child, just under three, walks behind them, swinging her arms distractedly.

Suddenly a tiny shoe trips on a crack and goes down, her face scraping against the blacktop.

The father stops to pick up the bawling child, tells her she is all right, there's no blood, clutching her under his remaining arm.

Half Past St. Mark's

Past midnight, the dog stops to sniff the trunk of a tree that has not yet lost its leaves.

We hear the rustle of wings above,

black forms nesting in the branches, sleeping.

We step away to give them privacy, but they are alerted and take to the air together.

The crows quietly loop and loop against the streetlight glow,

against the visible half moon.

Each turn they take in the night sky makes a fluttering sound,

causing a shiver in the atmosphere.

Their shape shifts in the darkness, one bird leading them one

moment,

another then taking them a different way.

With me and the dog at a safe distance,

they fall out of formation, tumbling back into the boulevard tree, silently, like black birds into a pie.

At the No Parking sign

My dog Beau was smart about geometry, he never tangled the leash around a post. If he saw a post, he walked around it on my side, he never tried to go around. It was little things like this I loved him for, unlike so many dogs today, who get wrapped several times around the post, and they turn to you with that hapless expression, as if to say, You know that thing that always happens? It's happening again.

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.

Palos Verdes

Los Angeles is the loneliest place to be lonely.

You can go months without a conversation.

People driving in their bubbles, AC turned up to high.

So when you meet a girl and she's sweet as Frankie, sun-splattered and kind, with a hint of sadness in her eyes,

you feel you have dug up treasure on the beach.

And at sunset in Palos Verdes you are all over each other

in the front seat of the Chevy Biscayne,
and you undo the buttons and you see the scars

They are like giant zippers zigzagging her chest, and she is crying giant greasy tears and bubbling about the windshield she shot through and the No Parking sign that pierced her breast.

And you hold each other and you cry so lonely And the sorrows crash over you like waves.

Children

When we are little it is hard to believe we will turn into our parents. Grown-ups are so ugly and so tired with orange pads on the bottoms of their feet, the pores of their faces cry out surrender, and the hair, the hair is everywhere, But once we are grown we have only to look at a child to glimpse what they will become. The face fills out, the limbs acquire bulk. The boy enters a door and exits his father like a breed of ordinary dog. Or the boy roars into his fruition the malification of his mother, her beauty beaten into him like bronze and ramping out again like laughter to the world.

Clearance

The bridge posted clearance of 17 feet, two inches.

Perhaps your tires were overinflated at that last truck stop.

A two percent variance could yield this result.

Perhaps there was high construction this summer and the new blacktop added just a hint of height to the layer.

But who's going to whip out a tape and measure the difference,

especially with the cross draft zagging alongside the access

road,

the tape twisting and lengthening in the wind?

If You Go Down

If you go down, if your face actually touches the ground something happens, people loosen your collar and get on the horn for help. Soon a vast and wonderful system is engaged on your behalf because you went down. But your face has to touch the ground and if it doesn't no calls are placed. It's all about the touch, it's all about the feel of face against street, that part is intolerable,

and our beautiful idea springs into action

which is why I say to you
when you fall, really fall,
be horizontal, even unconscious
and a thousand doctors
will reinflate you
to the maximum PSI,
just don't keep stumbling
like so many people do,
to your left and to your right,
too afraid to go down
and admit that it's over.

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."

Like a Rolling Stone

I wish to suggest that "Like a Rolling Stone" is a kind of national anthem in disguise.

I have loved this song from the moment I heard it back in 1965, being driven to work on the Lake Erie Road in Ohio. The original '45, clocking in at six minutes and eight seconds, is revolutionary radio. Bob Dylan is already famous, but for his political folk songs like "Blowin' in the Wind" and "A Hard Rain's a Gonna Fall."

This is something else. It isn't like any love song you ever heard, yet it is sung to someone or something Dylan knows intimately.

It begins with an odd riverboat rhythm, with a fluttering banjo-like sound in it like the pinwheel sound of a baseball card in a bicycle's spokes. My mental picture is of a large and very serious boat steaming its inevitable way upstream. Thirty five years later, I don't know what makes this fluttering sound.

Dylan begins to sing, and it is one stinging accusation after another. Whoever he's singing to seems female: Beware doll, you're bound to fall. You've gone to the finest school all right, Miss Lonely, but you know you only used to get juiced in it.

It is so hot, it burns. Was anyone ever this angry, and this screamingly articulate about it? What a feat it is, sustaining that white hot hate in words, and simultaneously offsetting it with sympathetic lines: "Now you don't talk so loud, now you don't seem so proud, about having to be scrounging for your next meal" – how'd he do that?

That mighty boat slogging its way upstream might be all of us, all America all the time, with its contradictory dreams and proclivities. "Like a Rolling Stone" is the song "Blowin' in the Wind" was too weak, too earnest to be. The earlier song hoped for a change of mind: The answer is blowin' in the wind. This song is like a spotlight that bakes its subject in the heat of its own hypocrisy.

The hypocrisy is one every member of my generation has carried around all his or her life: How to be virtuous and decent as the people in our ideals, when our institutions and our culture and our own moral obliterate those good intentions by the hour?

Miss Lonely isn't Joan Baez. More likely, Miss Lonely is Lady Liberty in New York Harbor, pleased with the poem on her pedestal, but standing watch over the ripoff of every immigrant that stares up at her, the exploitation, enslavement, and imprisonment of the unwhite, the slaughter conducted in the name of democracy and freedom.

What I like about my idea is that it rescues a song I love from being purely vindictive, just him being an egotistical ass. If Dylan is accusing not just an individual who disappointed him, but an entire culture that is blind to its own lies, then he is not just the self-indulgent brat many take him for (the twerp in "Positively 4th Street"), but the kind of Old Testament scold that his best work typifies.

In his Christian phase, Dylan advised the world that, devil or God, "You have to serve somebody," that there is no hiding from the moral choices we make as people. Here he is saying the same thing, only much more pointedly and personally. It is an anti-national anthem, calling us to atone as a people for our egotism and pride. And as such it ranks not just as a classic piece of beat poetry, but among the most stirring religious utterances ever.

What an odd person -- so ferociously proud, yet called, at a baby's age of 25 years, to admonish this grasping, material world for its self-congratulation and vanity. The question remains, can we regain the humility we require to be just? Or are we stuck this way forever, forever the object of such withering contempt?

Gosh Bob Dylan!

I was making a left turn against traffic when I was struck broadside by a FedEx truck.

Next thing I knew, I am being ushered into a cell in Hell.

The place smelled like rotten eggs, but not overwhelmingly so.

You could get used to this over time, I think. The surprising thing is,

my cellmate in hell, sitting at a chessboard, his crossed legs showing

a fine pair of rattlesnake skin boots, is American music legend Bob Dylan.

He looks up warily as I hold out my hand in introduction.

"Gosh, Bob Dylan!" I say, trying to absorb this extraordinary turn of events.

"I mean, if a fellow has to die and go to Hell, this is a pretty nifty dividend!"

Dylan stops filing his nails. "I'm a major fan," I say. "I have most of your albums

in my collection." Then, catching myself, "Had most, I mean to say."

I tell him about my favorite records and songs. "And, 'Ballad of a Thin Man,' I mean --

what can I say? Classic, classic song! Kinda spooky though, too.

Maybe you can tell me who Mister Jones really was." I examine the room more carefully.

No bookcases, no TV, no stereo. No pen or paper. Really just a sink, the chess table,

and the two of us facing one another. Forever. "I know this is hell," I say to Bob,

"but I'm genuinely looking forward to conversing with you. You have no way

of knowing this, but I'm actually a writer, too. I mean, not like you,

but let's just say I've taken the muse out for a spin, if you get what I'm saying."

Dylan cocks an eye at me. "Ever think that maybe you're my hell?"

"No," I say. "The thing is, I'm not a hundred percent sure why I'm here.

I get you being here, big rock star et cetera. But I was a pretty good guy.

And I read a lot – even that play by Sartre. Well, Cliff's Notes, anyway.

But we can talk about that. We've got tons of time."

Ginsberg and Dylan

the mantle,

For the Rolling Thunder tour, Allen Ginsberg joined up with the troupe and was given six minutes every night, to buy time for the stagehands to work, to bless the event with mad poet pronouncements. Everyone agreed it was great to have Ginsberg along. It was Ginsberg who crouched in the background while Dylan flipped the flashcards, the two of them strumming guitars at Kerouac's grave. Both were major avatars of the new day dawning. Ginsberg was seen as the greater poet then, though as time passed it became less clear why. Dylan was not much of a poet on paper, but everyone knew a hundred of his songs. How many knew thirty of Ginsberg's? And so many were undisciplined, crazy, stoned – firing but missing. Through all that insane time, there are no known instances of Dylan doing that. Like John the Baptist, likewise a Jew, Ginsberg readied

then felt the power slip away from him,
his head ascending like a bodhisattva through space,
past curtain after curtain, and there he is now onstage,
given a few minutes before the crowd to bang a
tambourine.

how rare is that! to chant a hare krisna, out of deference, but also to let the old man know who was boss now, which Dylan seems never to have missed an opportunity to do.

What Else Could You Be Doing?

Instead of listening to this poem, You could be jumping out the window, You could be engaging someone In a conversation that matters You could be spilling all your secrets You could be kissing the person you love But have not kissed enough, You could be eating a sandwich for the ages You could be thinking of a song That used to mean everything And thinking what it means again You could count your blessings, literally On an abacus if need be Instead of hearing me talk You could be listening to your own heart And doing what it tells you

The Poodle Who Tried to Be a German Shepherd

There was a poodle who wished to be a German shepherd.

Everyone admires that I am chic, he said, but no one respects my stature in the community.

So the Poodle fashioned styrofoam inserts and placed them inside his floppy ears,

causing them to stand up straight.

Then the poodle walked through the neighborhood with his ears standing up

and his eyes nearly slit with self-satisfaction.

But an American bulldog with a spiked collar,

taking offense at the peculiar new dog, tackled him and bit him on the haunch.

The poodle, having a soft palate, could mount no defense,

and slumped away to lick his wounds.

Oh, said the poodle, if only I had appreciated my own best qualities,

instead of trying to be something I am not!

Moose Cow

Rachel and I were drifting apart, in New Haven, 1979.

She was a grad student and fully engaged, I was out of work and depressed.

To piece things back together, we drove up to Baxter State Park in Maine.

But it wasn't working. We stood at a picnic area, yelling at each other.

Suddenly this beautiful/homely moose cow ambled through the area

we were standing in, chewing languidly on creek grass,

until she vanished from sight.

We watched the moose cow exit, then turned to one another, and laughed.

We have been together, mostly, ever since.

1983

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

Fools Unlimited

God is the reason we all go crazy begging scraps at every doorbell Why we wear diapers cut from the funnies duct-taped and leaking at the fold We embrace the people who betray us and we bless their bratty descents The taste of vomit is always in the mouth And it is not even always our own Confess to crimes we didn't commit Love Limbaugh and Gingrich and Jones Abandon critical thought forthwith Your intellect was never your friend A woman with crossed arms demands to know what happens now and who is to blame And the answer is always yes, of course the voices made us do it, again (2009)

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 unbrushed hairdo. You can make out the lines of her brown arms

through the sleeves. The mother sits with her black pocketbook in her lap,

the strap looped around one wrist. They appear to have rules about conversation,

taking respectful turns. Though their eyes light up, and slight smiles

glide 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, who seemed interested in the message

they carried, and who 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

Free Poetry Kit

abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvwxyz

My New Religion

Drifting down the river
with a friend who cannot save us,
who cannot stop the war,
who cannot set us free.
All we have is one another
heads in our hands
staring up at the stars.

Inheritance

My brothers and I glance up from our Sugar Pops.

There was our mother standing by the kitchen sink, the back of her hand pressed against her forehead, opera-style, as if taking her own temperature, which tended to run high.

Things like this tend to be hereditary.

So I was fortunate to grow up to be a poet,
so when that mood or any other mood overtakes me,
instead of passing it on opera-style to the people I love,
to the innocent gathered around me,
it goes into a drawer, hurting no one.

Old Saw

Out walking with Red, we came upon an ancient cottonwood tree, standing like a giant fork in the forest. Into that fork another tree had fallen, so that the original cottonwood stood straight while the dead fallen tree leaned into its crux, and every breeze made the live tree groan as the dead trunk rubbed against it, it was the sound of a balloon roughly handled, or metal failing underwater, like a natural cello's lowest string rubbed raw of its rosin. Eventually the dead tree had worked a groove in the crotch of the live one, and with the passage of time was wearing its way downward, splitting it down the middle. One main arm of the live tree had died, and owls and birds and other things have made their apartments in the soft dry flesh. Rachel and I stare up at this natural saw and we take one another's hands instinctively as if to assure ourselves that the rubbing of one life against another life means warming, not tearing. Love comes into our life but life comes to an end. What is left when love remains sawing gently on our limbs?

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.

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

Last Year's Xmas Dance

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

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

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

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

Colossus

I was brought to the site where my monument was under construction.

Tomorrow was its official opening.

It was a 150-foot statue of me, my feet set apart.

I held an enormous arrow in one hand

and a pot of something -- gold? -- in the other.

My head was held back, and the echo of heady laughter piped out of my enormous cast iron mouth.

Everything met my specifications, except for one thing -

my groin area was only about 65 feet above water.

This meant that larger ships passing through might come uncomfortably close to scraping my crotch.

I pointed this out to the architect-engineer, who protested

that construction was already over budget, and he wasn't sure what I was asking -that I raise the platform so my crotch was higher, or perhaps i wanted to dynamite the most vulnerable area

as a precaution against the kind of accident I envisioned.

What a choice. I indicated to the architect-engineer that I was starting

to regret hiring a monument man right out of school, but money was a factor, and i thought I might get lucky. I stared around the harbor. None of the other

seemed to be having the problem I was having.

I sat on the wharf, feeling punked by all the colossuses whose engineers had foreseen this eventuality.

Nothing ever works out for me.

The Plaque at Meeker Island

colossuses

There is a plaque at the old Ford Dam, beside a 15-ton turbine

that spun in the rushing Mississippi for 70 years, stealing power from the comb of water that falls thirty eight feet

like an unrolling carpet at the slaggy foot of Meeker Island.

The turbine is rusted now, and you can see the places where the water wore the metal down,

like bite-marks sunk by Mississippi teeth in cold Mesabi steel.

The plaque says the turbine in its working lifetime produced 1.3 billion kilowatt hours of electricity

for the families of Minneapolis and St. Paul.

Think of the turbine squatting in the roar,
taking everything the river gave,
melting snow from high up in the swamplands,
gargling the impossibly pounding water,
molecules exploding in the crashing white,
hydrogen, oxygen ripping apart
negative ions flooding the atmosphere,
these whirling blades converting this ceaseless falling
into work.

Think of the prosperity it means for the cities, the jobs and the money and the confidence it creates. Think of the lights that dazzle every room, of the families pulling out chairs and sitting down to dinner, think of the hot meals that we prepare, and the clashing noise of happy knives and forks. Think of the conversations that happen, and the jokes that we tell, and the love that we feel for one another, alive and living alongside this river.

IF ...

IF ... you want to be considered better than other people ...

IF ... you expect to be greeted with unusual deference ...

IF ... you want your judgment to be considered before that of all others ...

IF ... you wish to affect a commanding air in every situation ...

IF ... you want to be believed no matter how many times you have misled ...

If \dots you want fame and instant recognizability \dots

If ... you want celebrity and a pounding feeling in the hearts that hold you dear ...

Don't write poetry. Do get a dog.

Sentence

Nature divides us into male and female.

The woman is the object of loving,
the beautiful, the one acted upon,
kissed and caressed and implanted
with the substance of life.

The man is the subject of the sentence, the doer of the loving, the adoring one, he acts and is not much acted upon.

Like a hunter or a solder he isolates the object and sends forth his sting.

Which perhaps explains why, as I stand at the cash register paying the woman who works there the bill, on the line that says tip, I always enter forty percent.

There is a bear

First thing, you must appraise the situation. Might the bear be a friendly bear? Is it wearing a vest and a fez?

Does the circus happen to be in town? Is the bear sitting up and begging for a treat? Better hope you have a treat.

Did you notice are there cubs nearby? Did you bring enough treats for everyone? If it is not an obviosuly friendly bear, you should consider turning and running. Do this even though bears are famously fast. If this bear is unusually slow to follow, running should buy you a good two, three minutes, plenty of time to get your affairs in order.

Some people say to run downhill from a bear. Not surprisingly, it turns out that bears are just as good at running downhill as you are likely to be. Instead of running, step carefully. Try backing away deferentially. Maybe the bear is just feeling territorial and you can get away by with a show of respect, bowing and nodding as you edge away from it. Quite possibly the bear is miles from its home and doesn't really care that you are there. It is just looking for the right path to take. Do not whip out a map to show it.

Pepper spray – you are welcome to try it. But understand that pepper can act as an attractant or a repellent. Bear's choice.

Do you have Cracker Jack or other food on you? If so, get it off you. Bears love popcorn and caramel and peanuts. Distribute it as widely as you can. Distract the bear with easy pickings, and perhaps buy another two minutes. Understand that once treated to Cracker Jack, a bear will want more. How much Cracker Jack did you bring?

Note: Most bears, seeing food distributed on the ground, will understand that the dispersed food is now "in the bank." They can return and enjoy it any time they like. Whereas you are on the move, and trying to get away from them. You need to be put "in the bank." Bears are not idiots.

Is there a tree nearby? Go ahead, climb it. If a tree is not tall you can stay clear or the bear for about five minutes. Eventually, however, the bear will simply bend the tree over until you are low-hanging fruit.

If it is a tall tree, you should climb at least 30 feet off the ground, ideally till the trunk is too small to support the bear. But if it can only get close, it will still have the option of whipping the trunk from side to side until you let go.

This is work, but most bears will put in the effort. If the bear gets to you in the tree, even high up, the bear will hurl you down, break your legs and crack your skull, then follow down after you. This only takes seconds.

If you are successful with the tree, hope that you did not throw your food away as suggested earlier. You may be up in the tree for several days, until you faint or fall, or the bear gets bored waiting and leaves. This does not happen often. Most bears find the situation of you being up in a tree weeping entertaining, even if they are very hungry.

Your final option is to fight the bear. If you fight a bear, keep your backpack on. Wear it in front of you, across your beating heart. Fill it with rocks, if rocks are available. Lie face down. You want the bear to get at your heart last of all. Like the king in a game of chess, you must at all costs protect the heart!

Fighting the bear will be the challenge of a lifetime – literally – and in the end you will be broken and gashed open in several places, But the bear, who up until this moment has shown disdain for your abilities, will respect you now.

You will respect yourself as well – you engaged a huge carnivore in physical battle. You will have the satisfaction of knowing you tried everything, if you are still able to feel satisfaction. Do not play dead until you almost are. Admittedly, it is harder to be persuasive then.

Once you have been mauled, and the bear has finished doing things to you, stay where you are. Wait until the bear departs to begin the long ... crawl ... home.

Not to Knock the Grand Canyon But

A postcard from a friend on vacation arrived.

"Mike, you have not seen anything until you have gazed across

the Grand Canyon," it said.

I have gazed across it, so I knew what he was saying.

But a part of me wanted to take him by the lapels, long distance,

and say,

It's wonderful indeed, what with all those colors and such

But have you ever looked the other way,

from your own back porch,

and seen cumulus form and billow, light and dark, as large as a canyon, but grander, and flying, that's right,

flying in the sky and continuously morphing,

lamb airplane gryphon clover vacuum cleaner bunnyface firehat

Christmas tree pineapple -

and they're not waiting for erosion to do its slow work but they are transforming on their own, in a minute, writhing and whispering and booming and blown?
Compared to which, this thing you're so excited about is basically a ditch that we ruined when we choked off the Colorado for irrigation.

No, my friend, you enjoy your remarkable but desiccated gouge in the ground, but for me the direction to look into is up.

Too Much Money

After we ran out of room in the house We began transferring it to the garage, which filled soon thereafter. We made a down payment on a bloc of ministorage cells and that addressed the worst of the overflow issues but not in any permanent way. We started leaving boxes of money out on the lawn, and sat on the porch giving people the evil eye who seemed too curious. Eventually we rented a backhoe and dropped over a billion dollars in hundreds in Hefty Bags into the pit, each one secured by an industrial strength twist-tie, taking care not to crack the sewer line. Still the problem wasn't solved, so we were forced to stack it chin-high on the roof secured by a blue grommeted tarpaulin, so now when we eat we hear the beams groaning overhead from the weight of all that paper and all because, whatever else might or might not be true,

House of Demons

A priest returned to his home after a long journey and found it inhabited by demons.

They climbed his walls, hung from his ceiling, emptied his cupboard with their endless hunger.

They shit everywhere, and sickened the priest with their gruesome habits.

The priest tried beating them with a broom, but they would not budge.

He chased them around his garden with a rake.

He poked them with burning embers,

which only seemed to please them more.

Finally he filled his home with lotus and jasmine, until all but one packed up and left.

The one who stayed was the ugliest of them all, picking his teeth with a femur bone, wiping his snot on the walls.

"I am a priest of Lord Buddha,"

the man proclaimed,

but the demon heard him not.

Finally the demon whispered in his ear,

"I feed on your humiliation, priest."

And the priest, finally understanding,

knelt before the demon and begged him to stay.

At which point the demon transformed into Lord Buddha,

splendid in his saffron raiment

"You see how easy it is," he told the priest,

"when you stop caring about yourself so much?"

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?

The Woman at the Folies-Bergére

I thought many thoughts.

And I never said a word.

I told you a thousand silent things
But I never said a word.
Others opened their hearts to you
But I never said a word.
The look in your eyes shouted yes to me
And I never said a word.
I have thought about you every day
But I never said a word.

1977

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.

Charlene Counts the Hours

(found poem)

The lifetime of a lightbulb is the number of hours it lasts

before going out.
Charlene buys a lightbulb
with a lifetime of 932 hours.
How many weeks can Charlene
expect this lightbulb to last
if she uses it exactly
seven hours and 40 minutes
every single day?

Fishflies

They probably have some other name where you are,
These clouds of angels ululating in the heat.
Harmless as flying shrimp, they neither bite nor itch
Yet they fill the heated sky
with their bent translucent twigs,
Ecstatic to be together for a day before they die,
The endless day that extracts everything from them,
As if life were only about them and their rollicking hour in the sun.

They mass at your screen door like a theater on fire Turned back by a locked emergency exit, they perish in your car grill

Bodies packed so deep that the fan blade Scarcely cranks against the clog, and Robustly constructed spider webs collapse from the weight

Of so much happiness. They are an army of Egyptians Spun down in chariots to the sea floor, They are the Superbowl crowd with the bomb in the

stadium ticking,

They are the communion of saints strewing palms

In the path of the new king proclaimed.

They are put in play not for any reason that benefits them

But because God made a covenant with the pickerel and gar

Saying the sign to my chosen will be the feast

I visit upon you

In the first week of August, last days of July,

Eat this candy that I scatter on the waters

Till your gills no longer pulse and your stomach wants to split.

And so it will go, fish eating fly and man broiling fish
In a coating of garlic and crumb, each species imagining
itself special

Like a chain of being leading straightway to heaven.

Selling My Dog to the Circus

I felt the relationship had gone as far as it could go, so 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 ts 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.

To Understand A Woman

Watch her sleep.

All the sharp words and glances are gone.

Her face is relaxed,

with an element of sadness still about it,

because she can not be doing now,

she can only drink in the peace and power of sleep.

She has let down all her defenses,

and is snoring like a rabbit would snore.

Baboon Bride

The summer I turned 16, the summer of Sgt. Pepper, I took a job as zoo guide at Jungle Larry's Safari Island in Cedar Point, a big Ohio amusement park. My job was to be a groundskeeper, and eventually a caretaker of every kind of animal. My jungle identity was B'wana Mike.

I was the luckiest young guy in the world – sundrenched 18-year-old girls, Lake Erie sands, a jungle outfit, a dorm room, the Velvet Underground, a 1967 Buick Special. I read books by Alan Watts, dressed in a Japanese bathrobe, and burned sandalwood incense from my window. All the girls were older because I lied about my age to get in. My challenge was to love them credibly, the way a sophisticated 18-year-old boy would. It was a summer of lies. I calculate that I did not tell the truth for 100 days.

The opening weekend was Memorial Day. The loudspeakers played "Born Free" over and over morning to night. In my mind I always answered "and now they're in cages." It was exciting because the animals had finally arrived from winter compound. An animal that interested me was the wild olive baboon from Sudan. They have huge teeth and a reputation for viciousness. And vivid asses that no one wants to look at. In the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1932, a busload of Italian soldiers was attacked by a tribe of geladas, who tore the truck to bits and killed and carried off several soldiers. Baboons are fierce, we told ourselves.

We had a big male, Mombasa, and a smaller but equally noble female named Loma. They were incredibly strong and insane-looking. And Loma was in estrus. The first day we got a report that a group of Seventh Day Adventists was aghast because the two baboons were having sex in front of their group. We arrived in time to stake the two animals apart, so only their fingers could touch. This was at Jungle Larry's instruction. Then the terrible thing happened. Mombasa strained all the next night and day to reach Loma. Around 5 AM the next day he leaped up, and the chain yanked him so hard his neck broke, and he died in a heap of sawdust.

Everyone was upset. We put Loma in a traveling cage and pulled blankets over the sides, like a widow's compartment. We tried to carry on, as if nothing had happened.

My job included raking out the enclosure she and Mombasa had been staked out in. Everyone said, Don't let the baboon get the drop on you. They can tear the eyes out of your head in two seconds. On the third night, after the show shut down, I was raking, and I felt a hand grab my pants pocket.

It was Loma, reaching through the bars of the cage. I nearly let our urine. I put my hand on her hand, and she

quickly grabbed it and pulled me down, till I was kneeling and facing her. I could barely make out her golden eyes in the shadow of the cage. I pulled back the blanket to see her clearly. Intensely, she turned my hand over and over and examined the pores of my skin with her eyes, picking microscopic particles from the back of my hand. She was grooming me.

Grooming is a major social activity among primates. It is one way a tribe of creatures living together can bond and reinforce social structures, family links and strengthen relationships. It brings peace to even violent families. I looked at Loma and realized, for the first time, how beautiful she was. And she looked at me as fervently. She was grooming me because she needed someone, and I was it. In the days and weeks left to us, we communicated entirely by touch and by seeing

Summer wore on. Every day I worked, and chased girls when I got out. At night, however, I would sneak onto Safari Island and spent fifteen minutes with Loma. One Saturday I drove to Hammond, Indiana to see a girl who left Cedar Point because I got too fresh. When I found her apartment, and knocked on the door, a linebacker from Purdue opened it. Get lost, was all he said. I raced back to Ohio, to Sandusky, I knew Loma would be wondering where I had gone. When I got back, there was a commotion. The baboon has escaped, one of the guys said.

People gathered under a sycamore tree she had climbed up into. I saw her staring out over Lake Erie. I could see her realizing she was nowhere near home. There was no easy escape route for her to take. I called to her. Loma ... Loma ... She spotted me, hesitated a moment, then began climbing down from her high perch. I was so glad she was safe. I was even able to see her vivid ass coming down the last branches of the sycamore. She backed into my arms and held onto me. It was the only time I ever held her.

Four days later I was scheduled to leave, to start college. I couldn't say goodbye, so I slunk away, and drove across Ohio. And I put her out of my mind, and lived my life.

Twelve years later I was visiting Ohio with my wife. I wanted to show her the zoo where I had worked. I was impressed that the animal areas were more natural now, and more hospitable. We came to the primates area. She was behind see-through nylon cables, not

bars. There were eight baboons in with her – all babies and other females. Loma was white in the face now, but she sat like a queen on a log of green concrete, A great grandchild, or a great great clasped in her arms. Loma did not blink but she fixed on me. Life had moved on but she had survived and done well. She had made a career for herself in the jungles of Ohio.

That was my picture of our summer romance, and the beautiful creature who made a man of me.

Advantages of Turning Sixty-Four

Pretty girls start smiling at you again. Your years of being a danger to them are winding down.

The perception of harmlessness has been sneaking up on you for some time, and now it's plastered all over you.

And it's true unless you start stashing them into burlap bags and filling your car trunk with them.

But even if you did that, where would it lead? You lack the vigor for sustained engagement.

The other good thing is you're not really old yet, and so the girls don't pity you.

The bad diseases are still years away, and look at you, you are getting around fine, keeping your bodily fluids in where they belong.

Good times, with your kidnapping years well behind you, and a pleasant remission till the sucking sounds begin.

Intuitions

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

Rising Sun Campground

The signs don't invite argument:

THIS IS BEAR COUNTRY.

Do not leave food at your site,
not even hoisted into a tree.
Do not leave tubes of toothpaste around,
or any scented toiletries.

Even a candy bar left under your pillow is enough to attract a nighttime invader.

For the most part I obeyed these rules, locking everything in the trunk of the Toyota. Everything else I carted a hundred yards to an ingenious bear-proofed dumpster far from camp.

But one item proved difficult, the sudsy residue of dishwashing.

The tub would fill with bits of beans and rice, a thread of ketchup, the lemony scent of the detergent itself.

It was too far to move the liquid to the dumpster without spilling.

And so I walked thirty paces from our tent and drizzled it onto a sandy anthill, closer to another tent than ours.

If a bear did come, drawn by the smell of last night's dishes, it would venture into that family's tent, not ours.

And if we woke to nylon and canvass being torn to shreds

and an ambulance parked on the stony path,

parents and young ones mauled like pigs in their blankets, we would pack in silence and putter away to the next campsite down the road.

Poems I Meant to Write

I meant for the longest time to write about the little tasks, about tying the shoes, and fitting the hands into gloves,
I saw my big hands negotiating the laces and trying sleeve after sleeve over finger and thumb.
I could have had fun with the sand I dumped out of each sneaker, enough for a beach, enough for a castle and moat.

I could have written about the look on their faces sometimes, that they saw us not as the oafs who yelled and sighed and lived stupidly above eye level,

but shining gods, shining, omnipotent and perfect.

How when they cried in your arms
they were praying to you
to make it better, to lift the pain from their lives,
and you could.

I could have written about the tiredness of the house, the exhaustion of the tabletops, crusted with crud, sponged pointlessly after meals, the flakes and globs spattered on the floor that fill the cracks in the hardwood.

Or the handles on the stroller that were not long enough,

so you walked in a crouch, and the white plastic wheels that turned sideways on a whim

or a pebble and skidded to a halt.

comforter

I could have remembered their bodies between us in bed

when they were just babies, the smell of them there, the cramped caution of the dark, the wet exhalation from their noses. The kick of them against blanket, that wakes you and

momentarily annoys you, then draws you even closer.

Why did they finally leave our bed, our big pink

and the warmth of the family, for beds of their own?
There was space for us all, and another night
would have cost them nothing, but they went.
I could have described the last night they woke up
frightened and sauntered in barefoot
and climbed in between us.

They slept again immediately, and we tried, too.
But I know you were thinking, off on your side,
that this is the moment, and this was our life,
and the white skin of our children dove and fell
again beside us, in the bright sun setting, out to sea.

My Chrestomathy

Dedication to YUKON GOLD

A slab of a word is what I commend

That you can make use of,

a brick in the hand

Useful plus learning

weighed down by a stone -that's the word's meaning

People want it to be a joke (like Midas' spud) (like I'm one to talk!)

Here is evidence of high crime, so dust it for princes.

I pray some one of you finds

Who stole the baloney where it hung red and stiff in the upper balcony.

How I miss that old dead bird it was my only chance ever to be cured.

The Imperfect Tree

The large silver maple in our front yard it is not a perfect tree ...

It does not burn bright like a sugar maple in September ...

Nor the radiant leaves of the scarlet maple ...

It seems suburban with its silver skin and leaves ...

It grows so fast its trunk has split with stretchmarks ...

So thirsty that the rest of the lawn is dry ...

In the fall it drops its undistinguished yellow leaves by the ton ...

It is not a perfect tree, but ...

It is a patient presence, and it cools the house like an extra roof ...

It shields us from the glare of the low-lying sun ...

Cardinals and blue jays convene there for their business ...

And it never, ever, ever, ever leaves ...

Our neighbor plans to cut his down ...

It blocked sunlight from his home, which is much driven past,

for its luminous openness and J C Penney's charm ...

Which is admittedly not very apparent if a tree is blocking the view ...

But he's just tired of the ordinariness ...

So out comes the chainsaw, and down goes the tree, and into the house

it goes, one armload at a time ...

I wonder if it feels like an honor ...

After all those years in the cold and the dark and the rain ...

Those thankless, dripping, freezing years of service ...

To finally be invited by the fire?

2001

Hamsters

Several times I have opened an eye at night certain someone was moving in the house, but it was only the chrome wheel turning Or we would be making love and hear the sound of metal on metal from the children's room — the ball in the drip bottle pushed and released.

The crunch of seed between pointed pearls, the scurry and blink of prisoners.

In the cane, in the damp, in the moldy dark, they spin.

The Sugar Trap

To keep yellowjackets from our tentsite
I filled a pop bottle half-full
with sugar water and strawberry jelly.

As the day grew warmer the bees would alight on the rim

and one after another descend

to sample the pink nectar.

By day's end there were over forty bees in the bottle,

most of them drowned

with a few still clambering over

their fellows to climb out.

But the walls are too steep

and their wings too wet

and the water is too sweet

to avoid very long.

First they fly down, and spin inside the bottle,

delighted with their find,

enough sugar to feed their community for a month.

The sight of their comrades floating face-down

does not seem to be a major minus to them.

It is only when they set that first foot

in the water that they suspect,

and the struggle to rise up somehow is on.

It is impossible, they fall back

into the sticky syrup, their wings now covered.

Furious, they start twitching their abdomens.

This must be someone else's fault,

they seem to be saying, I never sought sugar for my own personal use, it was always for the hive. But community mindedness has fled and in their wretchedness they sting their comrades the dead and the dying, spasmodic, undulating, thrusting in their pool and this can go on for hours, and more. I did not see any bee trying to warn off any other bee either by gesture or sound, even though the arrival of the newcomer spells sting after sting. It is as if in their misery they call out to come join them. It is good to share this meal my brothers it is good to drink the common cup, so cold, so sweet, this wine.

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'

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 unflushed 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.

The Weather

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

The day of the death it began to drizzle

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.

Entrepreneur of the Year

This spider studied real estate.

She built her web at the corner station over the sign flashing Quaker State — and now her customers hang at her place and the reason she's such a sensation?

Location, location, location.

Summation

I know that you loved me
though the rails clacked
and the TV raged
because I was no good in the way
you would want good done
because I was the one
Particularly, or perhaps
it was the light of late afternoon
that rolled and stretched
like a davenport dream —
my hand on your hipbone,
like a witness taking an oath

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 rainboots
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

Old Man Mountain Climbing

The old man begged not to begin the ascent, but we looped a rope around his head and dragged him up, gasping.

Oh, don't be so negative we called back to him, staggering

And admit it, you need exercise, use it or lose it!

Halfway up he collapsed on the rocks, his eyes rolling bloodshot red. Come on, old feller, we tugged at the rope,

I must admit he did his level best, on those wobbly pins His breath wheezing out of him like an asthmatic accordion

And when we dropped him off at his place, we winked to each other

You know he's going to have a good long sleep now!

* I should have told you -- Old Man was the name of the dog

The Transfiguration of Danny Klecko

We climbed the highest mountain in Minnesota.

The sun streaking across the Gitchee Gummee.

We had come to meditate on our service to the people and to prepare ourselves psychically for the long campaign ahead.

When we reached the summit we were amazed

to see three spirits waiting for us -the giant Paul Bunyan, Hiawatha the Lakota brave,
and Grand Rapids' own Judy Garland.

Klecko called to them: "What is the meaning of this meeting?"

"You are the chosen one, the elect," said Hiawatha.

"We have to share good medicine with you."

Hiawatha offered his calument, stuffed with kinnickinnick.

The four of them puffed ceremoniously.

I, Big Vanilla, knelt at their feet and moaned.

Klecko asked them: "What advice can you offer for the task before me?

"Watch your step," the giant said. "There are people down below."

"Honor the people," Hiawatha said. "Suffer on their behalf."

"Give it your all," said the girl in red shoes. "Don't let 'em see you sweat."

The mist then enveloped them, and Klecko stood alone, his countenance blazing with wisdom.

"I thank you for this blessing," he whispered into the cool mountain air.

"I will not forsake this trust."

from the book PLATFORM: Mayor 4 Life

While You Are In Alaska

I try to keep myself busy,
I do the laundry, I sweep the floor
I try to keep my mind from thinking
Because this is only week four
I try to keep the garden weed-free
I cart the recycling to the curb
I pour myself another bowl of Wheaties
Thinking this is about what I deserve
How do I function when the clothes are still damp?
Where do I mop when I run out of floor?
I make a pile of pillows beside me on the bed,
And pat the pile and wish they were more.

Desalinization

As water became more scarce
we turned to our tears as a source
Suction cups hooked up to the eyes
Captured the precious liquid
Hand-held pumps converted them
to tapwater, ready to go
And the salt and the glycerine residue
were stored in underground casks
Nonstop grieving was encouraged
as an alternative to military service
High accidents skyrocketed
because it was so hard to see
But even that was not enough
to irrigate farm fields and
Planners looked for another source

And conducted tests on the ocean

And all agreed by the disagreeable taste

People have been weeping a long time

2009

My Gun Shoots Black Holes

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

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

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

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

It moves in trillions now. Nonillions now.

Quindecillions. Vigintillions.

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

My Bicycle

I set aside this perfect day to be with my bicycle.

Beautifully red, she's been mine
for three years.

I have just bought a pair of blue handlegrips.

Now for our free pirouettes in the sun.

There is no joy like this one.

Down a smooth hill

and into the wind, the low sound of whistling in her spokes -- I close my eyes

and trace a shiver down my spine.

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

Here, the figure eight.

Here, quick brakes!

I'm so proud, I applaud,

and my bicycle wheels sheepishly toward me,
sets her handlebar in my lap.

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

I mount her, and we ride.

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.

Surprise Us

We worry what will take us out.

A successful death would be a big surprise,

A bus suddenly swacking us in the face
or a bomb blast painting an X-ray on the wall.

Lightning tapping us on the shoulder.

Anything unexpected is okay.

What we want to avoid are the prolonged diseases, the shearing off of limbs, an inch per day, the missing breath, the body's steady retreat from functionality.

We don't want to die after we have been abandoned or at a point of dismal failure in our lives.

That would not be okay.

Ideally we are bounding up the steps to accept a big prize in Stockholm and a shot rings out and down we go, feet kicking but possessed enough

for thumb and forefinger to form an O and the three remaining fingers make a K.

Tiny

Tiny house like
a wedge of cheese.
There wouldn't be room
for all our stuff.
We'd live so small,
one plate, one spoon.
We always would
be touching.

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 quite believe.

We are beautiful, lovely ones —

so beautiful.

And then we are beautiful

beyond even that.

The Poem Room

It is a place of shame,

the only room with a lock

on the door.

To make it come out

you loosen your garments

and drop them to the floor.

There is paper there

for you to use,
one sheet after another.
But when you are done
how proud you are
of what you have authored.
You want to call people in
to show them what
you've made
and they smile
because they don't want
you to feel dismayed,
but in the end it is
the one thing you do
that is expressly you

Alien Abduction

You were innocent, you shared
The prejudices that connected us
Like prayer, and the world held firm
Behind its insipid certainties.
Now you have nothing to cling to,
You stopped making sense to people
And the ones who lifted you up
left you there without explanation.
How is a man to live like that
Except muttering and on his knees
Hanging one's head in the shivering corn
And living with an unreasonable truth.

The Wagonload

I was six when we moved to Vermilion-on-the-Lake,

six doors down Niagara Road from the lapping Lake Erie

Mornings and afternoons I walked the bluffs and beaches

gazing out at the choppy gray water

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

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

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

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

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

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

the problem persists

Lovely Thunder

How beautiful the grinding up above us is, the slowness of arrival, shoulder brushing against mountain shoulder,

the moans of cattle bawling for release,
the sound of empty barges let loose upon river,
thick skin of steel against steel, hollowly banging,
the notes that are sounded, each different
in its own rhythm but of the same uneasy song.

Salesmen ...

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

1975

Gise Pedersen Sets Me Straight On A Matter Of Natural History

"No, you've got this part all wrong,"
Says Gise, swatting a poem about birds
With the back of one hand.
"You have whippoorwills sobbing in the limbs

Of poplars, but whippoorwills don't perch In poplars, whippoorwills don't perch anywhere, Because their legs are just tiny twigs, They are gone into atrophy, no muscle left, So all they can do is plop themselves Flat on the ground and make the best of it There on their haunches. And furthermore. What is this sobbing business? It's poetic But hardly accurate. Their cry is more Like a cheer, it is a call my son Peter, Before he died, liked to imitate On his walks home from school. Many times, late summer nights in our cabin, Hendrik and I would be feeling morose, Only to hear out there in the darkness The cry of a creature pressed close And shouting from the cold of this earth To all who might hear him: VIP-poor-VEE!"

Why Poetry

Other kinds of writing, people are always in a hurry to get it done. Make the deadline, ring the bell. Come on people, step it up. Poetry, that never happens. Zero demand, less reward, I tell you, this thing was invented for the likes of me.

Why I Favor Friends That Are Flawed

Ironically, it's hard to get close to the likable.

The economics of affection prevent it from happening.

Those for whom relationships come easily
soon find that they are booked up solid,
and though they retain their considerable appeal,
the fact is they have are compelled to close up shop.

They have given away so many chunks of themselves
there are no choice cuts left to distribute to
newcomers.

This is not to say there aren't wonderful people who keep giving and giving, I' m sure you know the type.

I am convinced these people have mastered themselves and keep beaming and blessing despite gauges showing they have arrived at the bottom of the barrel, and won't be around much longer.

No, it is the less lovable who are now actually more lovable,

for they present a greater valence for love, precisely because, tattered and rude, no one else wants them.

Their hearts are one hundred percent intact
And their fumbling inexperience with caring and love
makes them vulnerable to your interest in them.
And while other people wonder what on earth it is
you see in this poor excuse for a human being,
You have reason to be pleased with your choice.
Because while they may be gruesome to other eyes,
they belong to you, to love and to know,
on a nearly exclusive basis

Dog In The Manger

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

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

To A Stranger

We never refer to it,
but it's always there,
the thing unsaid,
this restless hunger
to be known.
Why does no one
seem to see the truth in you -the effort you've been making,
the earnestness of your love.
You sit there giving
as you so often do.
Maybe this will be the hour
it all cracks open,
the moment of contact
when you can't keep it up

a single second longer, and everything spills out of you like feathers from a gun. People see the goodness in you, they see the courage you show every day just getting up and going about, the things you don't talk about but are never out of reach. Your tender heart that has already been broken multiple times, that you keep patching together and sending back out, that sense of duty to those you belong to, even when they seem unaware. I see you in your beauty, the hope that has no hope, it's just you making a trip to the well that you have visited so many times before. I know. Because I see you.

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.

Get Right With the Devil

We could save ourselves a lot of trouble if, instead of trying to be better people, we focused on bringing the devil to God. Those two love each other deep down, you can tell, though sometimes you have to read between the lines, and perhaps our whole reason for being is to urge them into reconciliation, because after we lose those two characters we can do anything we like.

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

Feedback

An acquaintance stood before a group And read his poem.

I was taken aback, and sought him out.

The words you read, I asked him -

Were they what you intended?

Because it's sad, you know, you could have been doing anything instead,

brushing carrots or changing the gravel in your fish tank, something purposeful and good.

What you wrote, I tell him, it must have been a lot of work on your part,

I can't help wondering

Why you did it.

Have you ever considered, I asked, whether your muse is out to get you,

to embarrass you so badly with her nudgings that you can't leave your house any more?

What did you do to her?

What accounts for her dislike of you?

Seriously, I am curious to know.

It's funny, you know, because life is full of knee-slapping adventures and outrageous coincidences

and fall down farting stories,

but then this is what we write about, the cracks between words we don't understand, the whimpering sounds we make when we want people to know how sensitive we are but we're not quite sure what we feel? You know what I think we should be doing? I think we should be laughing our asses off at our ridiculous lives and the bumpy journeys we've all been sent out on, frypots clanging and us whipping the plastic reins and hollering hobble-de-hoy! We should be passing the jug varietals and blowing cheap wine out our noses at the incessant meddling of God, not his callous indifference to our plights. A poem should be like sticking your fingers in the electric socket and studying the star-shaped geometrical patterns we make when we bolt out our arms and legs. it should make us clap like toddlers those little tin monkeys with cymbals from China, we should be rolling our eyes and hurling underwater. Instead of writing what you've written, This persecuted piece of paper you hold in your hand, you should stand onstage instead and flip a lightswitch a hundred times till everyone sees green and magenta circles blipping in front of their eyes for the next half hour, now that would be a poem. But evidently we live in Minnesota and have taken a holy vow,

and we'll say no more of this for now.

2009

Monet Understood

To countermand a bout with depression
I row to the center of the lily pond,
and recline awkwardly in the boat.
Overhead the clouds bleat by,
and the pheasants beat a pathway through the sky.
My spirits soar at the knock of the woodpecker
like a seeker of truth in a faraway tree.
The cork I plugged the rowboat with
shoots out and strikes me in the groin.
It returns: the sinking feeling.

A Minnesotan in New York

When I landed at LaGuardia it was seventy degrees, all I needed was a thin jacket. For three days I walked the streets leery of beggars who seemed to know something, and shadowy figures lurking in doorways. But when the temperature began to fall and the canyon gusts blew plastic sacks like ghostly luggage, I came into my own.

I am more used to winter than them, it is my natural element, walking into the city wind, swinging my computer case at my side.

All along Sixth Avenue the muggers and murderers part, melted from their purpose by sled dog eyes, urgent and cheerful on a cold, cold night.

It's Over

This is the end of everything so far. Here is the beginning of everything else. Two days ago we were in love like fire. Now you've got us worrying again. This is the end of all up to now, This is the start of whatever is left. The end and beginning of life on earth. We take turns drawing the dotted line between us Like a long fuse, and our life together Spits like the wayward snake. Sometimes I want to let it go, Twist lid, watch it shoot from the can. I want to see if the fire we feed Would go out by itself, Or if we'd panic And reach for wood.

1977

A Hand Is Like a Flower

Hands are like flowers,
perched upon a stem.

A surgeon, rinsing and
holding them aloft,
sees beauty in their form.

Fists are like a buried bulb,
shaking with potential.

They turn on their joints in sunshine
like tulips in a breeze.

And when you have left the room,
visitors hold theirs up and blow,
and the ashen seeds set off
on a journey, in search
of something new to hold.

The Business Of Bees

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

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

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

Poetscorner.com

I have an idea for a website, where poets can go to be scorned.

Some Days Don't Seem Like Stardust

When the rent is due and the dog bowl's bare and depression blinds you to the glory stitched tight under the surface When the memory of being fashioned in the fieriest furnace isn't there for us When we are yanked from our perch by disappointment and shame We walk through the fog we know as now unable to glimpse the brilliant atoms we are swapping every day like flying fish We should love ourselves knowing we are the kiss of the universe everything pitching in to make us and us giving back at the end which is really no end at all even on a dank, dull day

The Macaw in the Lobby of the Hotel Campeche

How blue is his plumage. How startling his eyes. How bold his

language is.

He is like Groucho, greeting every arriving guest with a sarcastic remark. It's no concern of his who is offended.

He has to have his say.

They have done to him what is often done to the funny and the beautiful.

Sealed him up in a cell with burnished bars.

Anton's Syndrome

(The patient's denial that he is completely blind. -- Steadman's)

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

What was the use of doing things and saying things when all along the eyes went where they wanted to.

We called our veers and bumps decisions but they were less than that -- we thought we saw our house on fire, and far below the safety net, spinning.

We said, we see, we see.

It doesn't work, it isn't up to us,

some language says it better than ours -- it goes .

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

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

Certain gases contrive with stones, and the waters we cling to continue their long conversation with mountain and forest and tree.

The Movie Under The Blindfold

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

There in the water I first saw the bridge, It shimmered in the air like a bridge

Made of water, and over the bridge was
A bridge in the air, and over that
Bridge there was water;
I swam.

I passed underneath and made my way, stroking,

To a nearby island that was the head and shoulders

Of my wife rising out of the sea like a woman.

Weeks passed, the swelling went down.

Layer after layer fell off me like skin.

I shrank and I shrank until finally I

Was no greater than a man.

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

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

Anteater

He's a tough negotiator.

He doesn't just eat you,
he eats your wife
and he eats your children
and he eats your mother
and he eats your cousins
and he eats your insurance agent
he eats everyone you know.

He eats your whole city
then tucks the last ant in the side of his maw
and says
I'm sorry,
I can't help it
I was made this way,
I require vast quantities of ants to survive.

An Excuse for Not Returning the Visit of a Friend

Do not be offended because
I am slow to go out. You know
Me too well for that. On my lap
I hold my little girl. At my
Knees stands my handsome little son.

One has just begin to talk,
The other chatters without
Stopping. They hang on my clothes
And follow my every step.
I don't get any farther
Than the door. I am afraid
I will never make it to your house.

■ Mei Yao Ch'en

translated by Kenneth Rexroth from One Hundred Poems from the Chinese, New Directions

The Rain Will Come

When the stain sets and sinks into the cloth on a rag on a post on a gravelly hill where the ants march steady in the crimson clay The rain will come and wash it away

When there is too much to bear and you have worn out prayer
And there is some thing that needs to be gone the rain will come and wear it down

Though no one you know will understand something hard to comprehend though faith is dead and odd is even the rain will come and rinse it clean

When the gouge is deep and the hole erodes and scoured hollow by a stone

and the universe is as empty as a sin the rain will come again and fill it in

When you have given up for good

And you tried everything you could

And you made arrangements with the pain

And the worm has burrowed lengthwise through the brain

The rain will come and start to fall again

Mobile Greek Chorus

Radio dispatched, they can be on hand to minister to every moment of panic

They know somehow what is in your heart and what must be weighed against what

Sympathetic to you, but also mindful of the needs of the larger community

Should you act out of rage or selfish desire, that might be it for Denmark

They explain what the hero cannot Because they have the common touch

Still the megaphones seem a bit much

Don't

Don't get too attached to your feet.

They'll soon take off for the hills
because they must be going away,
leaving you on spinning stilts.

Don't plan on holding onto your eyes.

They have things to see on their own,
and all this time, all the livelong days
they were only on loan.

It's possible to go about your
business without skin,
but you will need a soft, wet coat
to hide within.

Beating Heart On Sidewalk

What do you do about it?

It's not cool to kick it under the hedge.

You could take it inside and try to raise it like your own, but it's hard to see where that will go.

You could call the American Heart Association, but this isn't really their bag.

Police are no good, they'll tag it and bag it.

you can see the dog in the screen door licking its lips.

This is the problem with every heart.

We see it huffing, a little bit scuffed from passing traffic, so brave, so hopeful, so eager to get back to business.

We know it's there, but we don't know

what to do.

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.

Triangles Prisms Cones

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

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

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

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

It sped on.

The dot
which was so small at first
became what it had to become,
a collapse into feeling.
Item broke down into item of light,
each one new and unknown.
It was "our home,"
a wave of slow motion,
which was all our lives forever.

Hurt So Bad

"The old songs are overrated," he said.

"We think they're good, but they're not, really.

We just looked them because we were young."

He said this proudly, as if it liberated him

to betray everything, to say no to everyone.

It confused me to hear him, because everyone

Who sang to us suffered for us.

The Beatles and Stones, the Temptations and the Who,
They gave their lives or they lived in madness
So we could rock in delight.

Little Anthony spoke to every breaking heart I knew.

Hear him singing:
I know you don't know what I'm going through,
Standing here looking at you.

Tell me Little Anthony did not suffer for me.

Twenty three years waiting for induction into

The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame,
He would bled for the many.

Hear him singing:

But let me tell you that it hurts so bad

It makes me feel so sad to see you again —

Except it didn't hurt so bad because of him.

The songs encircled us in lassos of love,
They were given to us and us only,
They were our treasure,
the only treasure we would ever know.
They were the passports we carried into life,
Laminates us with the pain of love.
They bound us to one another in perpetuity,
like insurance, only sweeter.

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.

Poetry Is Immoral

When it's good it inspires mob emotions.

Think Battle Hymn of the Republic.

Mao Zedong wrote poems, not very good ones.

Though he did not attract critics.

Poetry is undemocratic by nature.

One person stands before a group.

The poet does all the talking.

No time is set aside for rebuttal.

Poems make us so sensitive,
unlayering experience into ever-finer slices,
until we stare at ourselves staring at ourselves..
It makes people spend too much time alone,
in cubbyholes and Starbucks,
ballpoints in our teeth,
words hurricaning in our heads —

When we would be so much better off if we were out and about

in the sunshine.

Ollie & Zeppo

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 Zeppo,
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.

Pushed From a Huey

Interrogation in the field sometimes went this way.
having got what they wanted,
or having not got what they wanted,
they led you to the lip and gave you a nudge.
They always took the blindfold off,
giving you the gift of scenery.
You wonder what is the best way to spend your thirty
seconds -You could spend it working up your anger at the

Americans,

but isn't that a waste?

You could do the calculus on saving yourself, perhaps the perfect tuck and roll would minimize the wear and tear you are about to undergo.

There in the distance are the crags of Ninh Binh and that is your own village at its feet and there are your brother and little sisters somewhere out there.

It is natural at this point to start running in place, like a plummeting swastika, because why hold back, and someone may be watching

The New Policy On Showing

In the past there was no punishment, unless you consider a stricken look to be punishment, which is unfair because you can only give stricken looks to people who show, the faces you make have no effect on the people not there.

Starting January 1, this will change.

From that date going forward a fine of five dollars will be levied against those who fail to show.

I can already hear a hubbub forming, asking how can you charge people for exercising individual choice?

This is a valid point, except when you consider the no-shows we are talking about.

They are so sensitive they will kneel in the snow to hand us the money, and they will be prepared to pay again and again over the years ahead, because paying five dollars still beats having to show.

Living With Someone Who Lives In The Now

I am drawn to this attribute you have, your excitement at being completely here, eyes bright with sensation, fervor streaming from your fingers.

At the same time, I occasionally want to remind you of something that we talked about, or saw, or tie a string around your finger so that you don't forget.

But that doesn't register.

You go the window, you open it up, and in comes more and more and more -- there will be no getting through to you now.

Manitou Cemetery

į,

Suicide Minnie went mad because
a favored child coughed up blood
She died in the snow beside his stone,
mouth and nails black from eating clay.
Only fifteen live in Kinbrae today,
but two hundred lie here in the spongy soil.
Being sensible and land being land
the graveyard was dug in the side of a marsh.
In '59, when Jack's Creek rose
it lifted the boxes and bones of a dozen citizens
and strewed them among

the cattails and ratweed.

ii.

Ploughboys in this town were beaten into militia, fewer and fewer, war to war.

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

The inscription says Relinquunt, meaning they gave their all, leaving nothing on the table but their blood.

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

(1979)

The Dog of God

The dog of God has no free will.

He lives by the Master's convenience.

Left alone for long periods to fend for himself,

Nothing to drink, not a scrap in the bowl.

Parasites, ear mites, worms in the flesh.

The rapier teeth of a hundred invaders have left their marks,

And the old whiskered maw is white with the years.

A cataract clouds the left brown eye,

The malformed right perpetually weeps.

His loping gait is long since gone, he limps

And hobbles from gate to gate.

But when the Master returns from business

The hound of heaven staggers down the path to meet him,

Manged tail clapping with joy.

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.

Dead Cat for Ray

I entered a barn on an abandoned farm in the town of Kinbrae where I lived.
In a manger on a bed of old straw I found a cat, very dead, very thin, no fur, its leather skin stretched taut around it.

Its back was arched in a defensive posture, its face pulled wide in a final hiss, and in its mummified condition you could distinguish each vertebra and tooth.

I believe it had a heart attack and died defending itself,

perhaps against a German shepherd or raccoon.

The attacker slunk away, leaving the cat a mummy of life

and death.

When my friend Ray came to visit the farm
I took him for a tour of things I had seen —
the grave of Suicide Minnie,
the sandpaper leaf of the lamb's-ear plant,
finally to the manger in the Sveringen barn,
and we stared at the cat like reverent bad boys
then walked home.

That night we lay down in the township road and watched the aurora shift and split in the northern sky.

Ray was from Cambridge, a city guy, gay, into est, a sculptor, painter, performance artist.

He flew back home the following day, and I did not hear from him for two years, when he invited me to read a poem at an exhibit of his. The art was stupendous, torsos in charcoal, roughcut wood, hairy ropes, chains.

Ray couldn't draw his way out of a bag, but he had something else, a ferocious vigor that moved me.

At the heart of the installation he had suspended on an invisible line the dead cat from Sveringen's barn, and it turned slowly in the warm air of the gallery, whiskers stiff, eyes black, teeth bared to the ear. It was like, the height of bad taste to exhibit a dead creature as art, and yet everyone who saw was overwhelmed at the brave agony of the cat. In a gallery that had seen plenty of bad ideas and wrongheaded impulses here was life and death hanging in a haze,

it was more than noteworthy, it was serious.

A part of me resented that Ray had stolen back in the night

and taken my holy treasure from me,

the other part gratified he thought it so powerful that he packed the dead animal in his dufflebag and drove

from Minnesota to Massachusetts with it in the back seat.

And astonished to see it now, in its current setting, twisting in the light.

Afterward I lost track of Ray. We had been friends since college, him always private, a dog-eared copy of The Drunken Boat by his bed.

His scoliosis was so bad he spent a summer walking through Europe with a backpack full of rocks to straighten himself up.

Once I went to his room to listen to Highway 61 Revisited

and came upon his diary and read a few pages, and I felt so ashamed of myself I started a diary of my own, in which I talked about looking at his diary.

In January I quit college and itched to Boston and spent a

month in an apartment 20 inches from the El tunnel.

Every 20 minutes the train passed near,

but my friends and I were so high we thought it was charming

when the milk vibrated in the refrigerator.

I took him to the Tea Party and the Velvet Underground was playing

and we lay on our backs in a psilocybin haze and watched the ballroom dissolve.

Back at college Ray began joking that he was Jesus, and then as time passed, it wasn't so much of a joke anymore.

Without a smile he turned in a 36-page religion paper titled simply "Jesus," and every page was blank.

The professor had him sent home to get better.

Ray, I didn't know you were gay, and I wasn't your type, and it never mattered.

You worked for three years teaching painting at Walpole Penitentiary,

to murderers and rapists and killers.

On the last day you told them that you were gay because you wanted them to know you, and that a person

could be OK and still be a faggot, but you didn't want them

to feel obliged to kill you in the process.

I didn't worry about the inmates so much as AIDS.

When people started to die you assured me you didn't do

the things that put a body at risk, but I worried anyway.

You visited twice after the cat exhibit,

and Rachel and I had had two kids, and our lives took a sharp turn away from one another.

For a while you were in Cleveland, teaching at the museum.

Then Malaysia, doing I don't know what – and that was where I lost you.

I called your parents, I called your friends, no one would tell me where you were or what became of you.

I needed to understand because we were friends.

You once gave me a wonderful compliment, you called me a human being

and that was so meaningful coming from you,

for whom human meant noble and feeling and alive and crazy

was not so bad, it was a sign you were paying

attention to things.

I admired you so, and if I had the great spotlight of the world to direct

you would be turning in it now

like that dead cat in the gallery, abused in life and abused

beyond it, ugly and craggy and ridiculous and raw but fully engaged, all muscle and mind alert to life and life's unlikely opportunities and the aurora borealis would shift and slide and light up our faces like 1977, and the light show on the Velvets in 1968, and that trip to Rockport in '73 when we lay in the back of the pickup truck watching the phone lines loop overhead,

when we were young and not yet treed or backed into impossible corners, and the world that I saw, Ray,

the beautiful courage in the crowclaws of your grin and the manic dazzle of your eyes, radiant artist and friend of my youth, I would have them know.

Opportunity

Logically the caterpillar
would chew the leaf forever
But then the tumbler clicks inside
and worm begins spinning its tomb
How afraid we would be
to seal ourselves in like that
Until all light is gone

And there is no leaf to eat

And all movement ceases

And we tremble in the dark

Poet Wasting

The main reason we hunted them down was because there was so dang many of them. We're not a cruel people, it would have been crueler to let them live. Put a bounty on their heads and set them loose at the onset of winter, run them down before too long and if you sent the liver to the DNA for testing and it came back OK you got to keep the whole thing. It was hard at first, looking into those plaintive eyes then jacking the trigger It wasn't their fault they were so numerous, all they ever really wanted was to say a thing so it lived a while in the heart but even that got old after a while

Why Do Friends Love Us?

Why do friends love us while we hate our guts?

How do they overlook the disturbances we fix on?

The patterns and indulgences, the sickening repetitions
--

Is it because we spend all our time in here, with that -- And we exhaust ourselves and the relationship is so tense.

Maybe we need to back off a bit, take a break from ourselves,

Until we are superficial but loving with ourselves the way our friends are, and we see us the way they do, from somewhat of a distance as forgivable things that they are not all bound up with.

(2008)

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.

God Must Love Crazy People

He made so many of us
When we shout to ourselves
on a busy street and not
into a cellphone
He smiles

When we start arguments out of nothing and imagine persecution till a person bleeds, literally bleeds
He daubs His eyes with joy

When we miss the rent because all our money was spent on a Krazy Kat clock with ping pong eyes it constitutes divine surprise

as if this was what the world He made from mud was really for

When we weep ourselves to sleep because we can't seem to change and we drive everyone we love out into the darkness cursing

it matters, it is fulfulling, it matters a lot to Him, it is the purpose of the entire experiment

God must love the crazy people or why would He make them the way that they are impossible to put up with unhealable as disease

He loves us because
we remind Him of Him, incomprehensible
to the core

Siamese Twins At The State Fair

They don't do it anymore, provide peeks at freaks for seventy-five cents as a feature of the midway experience.
But back then my friend Bob and me tiptoed into a tent and saw two girls older than us and not Siamese, connected at the forehead, languidly paging through a single issue of Little Lulu.
One of them, the larger one, chewed Juicy Fruit
Bob and I tumbled down the out ramp.
We were sarcastic, opinionated boys

But we did not speak again for twenty-five minutes.

Busy

You have to stay busy, I'm not clear why.

Oh -- doing things shuts out the noise. Silence makes us stupid.

And then there's just doing like sweeping or folding --

and we are our happiest then.

Jacob the Crow

Down by the river the crows are calling in the cold. Some have a metallic sound like a clang,
Others sound pinched as if the call
Were squeezed out from inside, like paste,
And spewing the last dab that is in them.
Just now I hear a sound that jerks me around,
The hairs stand spike upright on my neck.
It is the sound of a boy calling out, Ahhh!
The voice vibrates as if running downhill,
And the sound bounds out of him that way,
Every thump a reverberating Ah!
I expect to see him waving a mitten

From the knoll across the marsh.

But it is a crow, perched low in a maple.

It dips its beak, and calls again Ah!

And for a moment I believe the crow and boy are one,

And the crow is saying, I saw it all,

And I alone survived to tell.

A boy of eleven, bursting from a screen door

And running to a field, past the creek that runs

Through there, and stomping wet-footed

through familiar places,

A journey that ends in a sack in the dark

in the trunk of a car in the bearded black spruce.

But when the man opens the lid the bag is empty

And the boy is gone, he was ushered away,

Installed alive in the topmost branches.

When people cluster like clucks at the scene

the black angels circling above mock their sorrow -

Why seek him here, the boy is flown.

And the eyes that adored every wild thing

Are different now, they do not blink,

The mouth never yawns, the limbs do not

Stretch out in bed at night like a song of skin

And humming blood and growing bone.

He who begged to be set loose was.

And now it is he who alights on the highway at dawn,

Stripping muscle from the runover body.

The other birds bray

About shiny tidbits fetched in the light of day,

They thrive like men on predictable dreams.

But behind the dull black bead of eye

Is a boy who knew darkness deeper than a well,

And cold more pitiless than snow,

Who knows the heart endures

What winter cannot kill.

The Young People

We were like jewels glinting off one another's light, sapphires, rubies, garnets, pearls ... our teeth were so beautiful and so was our skin, nothing old could hold us in, our poor parents were at a loss to contain this savage perfection, the Buick roaring from gravel onto highway, laughter and beauty and limitlessness, six-packs of Rolling Rock, sexy cruel sneers, and our poor dear mothers in their babushkas and aprons carting Kleenex out of our bedrooms, and father with the gathered hose damping down the lilies. What religions would we not topple? What ancient wisdom would be next to fall?

In Praise Of Granite

"My incense rises heavenward to thee"

-- Inscribed on Thoreau's chimney

The beer cans say they've been at it all summer,
The high school kids, parked on land that isn't their
own,

Getting high and sliding their fingers in and out

Of one another's underpants.

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

Back in Cambridge, Ray looks at the picture

For the thousandth time, a Chinese print of a dragonfly

Lighting on a bamboo frond; it's almost invisible.

A few blocks away, I'm sitting on a granite curb In front of an Episcopal abbey.

Someone is behind me, a monk with Japanese eyes.

Do you want to make a meditation, he asks.

In Concord, several kids have fun

Breaking bottles on the one stone left from the shed

On Walden Pond, dense granite it was.

Lying on our backs in the rear of Dirk's pick-up,

Ray and I watch as the wires loop from pole to pole,

The sudden explosions of treetops above us.

Govinda and the Park Policeman

The enlightened one and a disciple walked down a mountain road

to sit at the foot of the cascading waters that were famous in that province.

And it was here at this waterfall that he understood
For the first time the poured-outness of God
Into the world of nature, how divinity infuses itself
In the commonest things, the splash of a trout
Or an insect's buzz in the hollow of one's ear.

And when his meditation was complete.

The two climbed back up the mountainside,

Where a park ranger was issuing them a citation.

What is the matter, officer? he asked.

You park registration is good for sixty minutes

But you have been here for almost an hour and a half.

I see, said the compassionate Buddha. But you know,

We were praying by the waterfall and lost all sense of time.

That may very well be, the ranger said, but it's not honest

To pay for sixty minutes, then try to get away with ninety.

I assure you, officer, I had no intention of deceiving.

But as you can see, I am but an old monk,

And these legs are not so fast at climbing steep hills

As my young companion's.

Then you should have paid for three hours, said the ranger.

Perhaps you should put a meter on the waterfall,

So people can deposit their money directly, said the disciple,

Who was red-faced with irritation.

Peace, my son, said Govinda. Indulging in sarcasm

Solves no problem, and creates many.

Besides, this good man is merely doing his job.

Write him a check then for the full amount,

But mark on the memo line:

"A tax on illumination."

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

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 Vieckes
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 afathernd 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

Rx for Happiness

Admire your daylilies dailily.

Fly

I felt a deerfly land on my cheek.

Instead of me slapping it, it slapped me!

The tiniest hand you could imagine let me have it.

At most I felt a tiny itch.

And then a sound I could barely hear.

Perhaps, "britzel ... britzel ..."?

But I got the sense it was warning me about something,

urging me to shape up.

"Listen," the fly said, "I'm going say this once.

Life is pain. Accept it, you stupid, stupid man."

Then it buzzed off.

Impressive, I know, nevertheless I am downgrading the alert.

Every insect cannot be some kind of angel, sent to deliver a message from the cosmos.

I'm sorry, there are too many bugs for that to be true.

Catching the Cannonball

Never rush to greet it. It sounds like a bold thing to do,

but results are not encouraging.

The opposite approach works better, where you turn and run and hope your speed and its speed are equal, and you catch it softly in your arms, like a baby.

Known as the Hail Mary play, it constitutes a prayer because your top speed is about 18 mph and the shot is

barreling toward you at about 250 mph.

Physics does not provide you with much latitude.

Then there are a clever few who imagine they can zig or zag their way, sidestepping the gathering ball.

This approach arises from a misunderstanding about cannonballs.

They are not random events to be dismissed the way a matador brushes the raging bull aside.

This particular cannonball was fired the moment you were born

and it knows exactly where you will be standing as it descends. Best advice is to stare it down, to observe it glowing and growing in size and to identify what meaning you can in the fateful, flaming convergence.

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.

A Monument to the Unemployed

June, 2009

Why doesn't the U.S. honor the people who fell in the Great Emptying Out of 2008?

In the space of a single year 12 million people lost their jobs. From all reports, many will never work again, certainly not for benefits.

And yet, the U.S. has done little to thank this enormous group for their gift to the country.

What was their gift? They served us as scapegoats, sent out to perish in order to save others.

Every person who lost his or her job prevented another person from losing his or her job.

But has anyone detected even a scintilla of gratitude among still-working people who were spared by the termination of these 12 million?

It is a sacrifice comparable to the one made by our fighting men in World War II. Over 400,000 people gave their lives in WWII, in combat or otherwise. The losses rolled through every family and every community.

But our loss was 12 million people, more than 25 times the number of WWII deaths.

As with the war, these people were drafted against their will. The economic costs to their families dwarfs the losses of WWII. Families drew down their savings. Millions lost their homes.

Without health insurance, people lived shorter lives. Mental health plummeted. Suicide has surged. Divorce rates rose.

These were the everyday sacrifices made by the 12 million that directly benefit employees who were not laid off.

Congress was uninterested in reaching out a hand to create jobs or provide assistance to the doomed 12 million. Indeed, many laid the blame for the recession at the feet of laid-off workers. They were excess.

They held the nation back. Congress terminated unemployment benefits. They made no effort to staunch the losses.

Shouldn't we do something?

I propose a six-story monument to be built in front of the Capitol in Washington, DC, thanking the 12 million for taking the hit for the rest of us.

I propose, in addition, a national holiday, perhaps the day after Labor Day, to honor the 12 million.

I urge you to take a moment and write your representatives and senators, urging them to set to work on the Unemployed Memorial at the earliest opportunity, before the last of the 12 million draws his or her final breath.

Chocolate Chip Sea Cucumber

The National Ocean Service web site explains that sea cucumbers are not actually cucumbers, nor are they vegetables or toll house cookies.

In fact they are animals, echinoderms, like starfish.

The misleading site features a picture of a delicious looking chocolate chip sea cucumber with no warning that the chocolate chips are not really chocolate chips, rather they are some kind of brown protective camouflage markings --

and the name does them a Darwinian disservice, undermining the dignity they are entitled to in the biosphere,

and disappointing to people hoping to enjoy the taste of real chocolate chip cucumbers.

When Poetry Paid: The Boom Years Of American Verse

Date of publication: March 27, 2000

For years I wrote poems the way everyone did.

I would sit under a tree and reflect on something. When something occurred to me I would write it down, make it rhyme, then dash it off to a literary magazine, which would pay me for the poem.

On a good day of reflecting, you could make \$500, if you were a reasonably good typist. The market was strong and the pay was good. The cliché simile in those days was "as sound as a poem."

But things changed. Masses of people turned off to poetry and turned on to television. The many millions of poetry readers dwindled to a few million. Writing schools, seeing a buck to be made, proliferated, luring unsuspecting poets in, without telling them that their markets had disappeared.

Computers, photocopy machines, websites, ballpoint pens and unrhymed verse made poems the province of the riffraff. Rhyme, alliteration, and assonance vanished almost overnight.

Anyone could do the new poetry. But no one could make a living at it.

You see the results everywhere -- a drifting army of unemployed poets, hanging around railyards and bus depots, willing to do just about anything for a nice salad.

The best went into whatever field held allure for them -- management, ophthalmology, small motor repair. The rest taught.

As an upper-echelon poet, I would like to say I weathered this economic storm unfazed. But even I was affected.

First, my income sagged. Eventually I had to sell one of my homes; fortunately, it was one I had never visited.

Over time my Rolodex of favorite editors shrank, as one greybeard after another was driven into other professions, let go entirely or replaced by editors indifferent to poetic form.

I tried to fight back. I now reflected twice as hard as I normally did, hoping to make up the deficit in volume. Some days, I got headaches. At one point I joined the Poets Union, but I could not bear the environment of pinko collectivism.

So I came up with my own adaptation, which is to form strategic corporate poetry partnerships. My poetry agent scans the business headlines. When we identify a suitable partner, I reflect about them and write a poem that meets both our needs. The resulting poem makes a compelling observation about the natural blessings of life and imagination, plus it provides attractive product placement for the partner.

Most readers are not even aware of the arrangement.

The new approach proved a stellar success. I successfully partnered with companies in numerous industries now -- MetLife ("Actuarial Tables," Antigonish Review Vol. 47, No. 3; Dow Jones ("Head and Shoulders," Massachusetts Quarterly; Spring 1999; and Intel ("Silicon," Poetry California, February 2000).

Three short poems, \$115,000 in fees. On the printed page the corporate poem is no different than a noncorporate poem, apart from the logo.

Some readers -- there are always skeptics -- predicted that partnering would affect the poet's voice and diminish the poem's authenticity. While I can assure them this has not occurred, and that my corporate verse is as authentic as anything I've ever written, the proof is in the eating.

To that end I provide you, these concluding and suitably profitable poetic postscripts. In the first example, I asked myself, if John Keats were to endorse a brand of beer, how would he do it? I think it would go a little like this:

On First Uncapping Stutrud's Brew

Much have I travell'd in the realms of ale,
And many handsome hops and bitters quaffed;
And many oaken kegs have I been fore and aft,
Which oracles bound to Ceres do foretell;
To the western wind have I hoisted seven sail,

Where mighty Dionysus shook and laughed;
And begged a token of hearty Falstaff,
Like a free card for getting out of jail.
How comes it that this beverage so clear
Obtains the sacred ripeness that is all,
An effervescence pyrotechnic to the ear -I drink it down and hear the holy call.
For I have supped with the gods of beer
Silent, on a Summit in Saint Paul.

Millions Demand America's Purest Silver Dollar -- Shouldn't You?

These legal tender U.S. silver dollars feature
a nearly 100-year-old design of Lady Liberty
striding confidently forward while draped in a U.S. flag,
while the other side depicts a majestic U.S. eagle,
thirteen stars, and an American shield.
But the clock is ticking. Timing is everything.
Our advice to you -- keep this to yourself.

Tear out the page if you have to, because the more people

know about this offer, the worse it is for you.

Supplies are limited and there is a strict limit of 40 per household.

It's a coin flip you can't afford to lose.

The Best Canned Corn Around

For me, there is no better way to start the day than opening a can of Libby's vacuum-packed sweet corn

and scooping them up with a clean soup spoon.

You wonder how they removed so much liquid from the can

without the corn going bad.

Delectable? You can taste the soaked-up sunshine in every mouthful!

Libby's -- hot or cold, the best canned corn around

Inheritance

My brothers and I glanced up from our Sugar Pops. There was our mother standing by the kitchen sink, the back of her hand pressed against her forehead, opera-style, as if taking her own temperature, which tended to run high.

Things like this tend to be hereditary.

So I was fortunate to grow up to be a poet,
so when that mood or any other mood overtakes me,
instead of passing it on opera-style to the people I
love,
to the innocent clustered around me,
it goes into a drawer, hurting no one.

The Holidays

I saw Mommie kissing Santa Claus underneath the Christmas tree. Fifty seven years later I still need therapy.

Nature

There are people in the world who are so remarkable of face

that traffic stops for them,

that others, beholding them, go to a distant place inside their heads,

and imagine endless days of worship in a golden light.

Because of the look that streams from their eyes,

because of features that seem sculpted by God,

the cheek, the throat, the color of the skin,

you know they will be objects every day of their lives.

Their lives may not be complete,

and they will never be certain they are loved because they are good

or just because of their cheekbones.

They will never have to work, whereas you, my beautiful one, will toil every day until you die.

Outside My Window

from: Songs of Disappointment

Every morning I part the drape with one finger, hoping yet again to see

professors of literature discussing with one another how deep beyond deep I am,

a head start, really, on the post-postmodern era.

There should be earnest young men lining up to receive my blessing.

By now there should be shy girls in pigtails, hoping for the touch

of my hand against a cheek,

and rapturous women in red dresses, their hearts in full swoon.

There should be the publisher's representative, bringing the day's valise of cash.

But when I look out the window I see grackles stealing the sunflower seed and behind them, the garbage truck backing up, saying beep ... beep ...

Osama Bin Laden's Pornography

New reports say that substantial amounts of porn movies

were found at the hideout in Abbotabad.

The CIA released this news, which raises questions.

If true, it's a way of pissing on bin Laden's grave, and shitting on it, if it's not.

What kind of porn was it? Was it Islamic, or at least Middle Eastern?

Was it soft or hard, straight or gay -- was it cruel, as we likely assume, or was there another Osama we never knew,

one who licked the toes of others and toppled skyscrapers

because he did not feel worthy?

The man had failed kidneys and needed regular dialysis.

But are people on dialysis big masturbators?

For that matter, was the porn even bin Laden's?

Maybe it was erotic entertainment

for when Al Qaeda dignitaries dropped by,

and a little masculine hospitality, like a toast with Cutty Sark,

was in order. Maybe it was inspiration for the soon-to-be exploded,

a vision of the action that awaited them on the other side of this life?

In our tradition God is dead set against masturbation.

It shows irreverence for life and disrespect for women.

Each time we jerk off, the nails sink deeper into Jesus' palms.

Maybe Allah is not so strict, but that would surprise me

because he seems plenty strict, generally speaking.

Maybe there were images of Muhammad, naked, pictures people

would lose their lives by seeing, but maybe he felt he had earned the right.

I think of bin Laden on a lazy Sunday morning, in his suburban compound,

nothing to do, forbidden by circumstances from taking a walk into town,

and saying Howdy to the people he meets, doffing his turban

the way that they do, his kidneys aching, none of the three wives on hand

doing much for him, rinsing out dishes and beating rugs for the most part,

and he gets so lonely, and he needs to remind himself he's still a human being,

his hands around the throat of the world, the secret smell of smoke

and molten plastic always in his nostrils, but never enough,

he has needs right now, he gets so bored, and the mysteries of naked bimbos,

living in lofts in New York City, stretching their beatnik limbs,

shamelessly showing him everything they have, and only the touch of a button away.

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.

Jesus Has a Lot To Answer For

In the Bible he says *Ask* and it shall be given to you,

Knock, and it shall be opened to you.

And so people have been knocking and asking for a very long time.

Please save my child from addiction, from disease,

From kidnapping and dying, Lord we pray.

Of course, only a small fraction experience divine intervention,

I would say maybe twenty percent at the most, and what is He to do if the tornado is bearing down on a playground,

hip-check and ricochet it to another town?

So the eighty percent are right to say, Dear Savior, it says here, Ask and it shall be given to you.

It doesn't say, Ask and I'll get back to you with my decision,

This is a promise of delivery, an explicit warranty with zero wiggle room.

So what do You have to say about that?

And Jesus will say, Well, we were perhaps a little casual with the language.

which I still maintain is true in a technical sense,

but you may perhaps need to hear the explanation from a trained theologian,

they are good at unpacking concepts that appear to be obvious.

Think of the whole asking process as a kind a lottery.

So the parents whose children died in their arms, whose reasons for living melted away like snow, the parents of these lifeless children look to Jesus and they say,

Why, you mother effing liar.

Most Dogs Are Good Dogs

It's an odd one that lies around thinking of ways to undo you.

They want a good relationship, they want to get along, they want to master, to the degree they can figure them out.

the things you expect them to do.

There are vicious dogs, but they are usually doing what they are trained to do -

i.e., they are being good, after a fashion.

And there are mad dogs, made that way by inconceivable torment,

and God knows they cannot help being that way.

When they trash the couch, pulling all the fluff out and onto the carpet, they are not intending to trash your dreams,

it was just an odd thought that stole over them, and even when they have a clear grievance, and are reminded then of their carnivore origins, they can be dissuaded with a pat to the head or a reassuring word.

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

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.

Revolving Door

Seeing the old man
Step tentatively
Into the glass cylinder,
The girl slowed down,
The two tiptoed around
One another, palms high.
He smiled at his partner,
And she, who had never before
Danced the minuet, stepping
Out with the old, stepping
In with the new, did
likewise.

Accident

This coffee cup broken on the floor will never be whole again.

Such a small thing,
still all this pain in your eyes.

Tell me, how can I make it right?

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

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

Cosmetic Dentistry

First the bad news.

The teeth you now run your tongue over will all be leaving your head, like that woman with the four-million-year-old skull whose canines were scattered like dice near the jaw in the red dirt of Africa's Afar Rift, because bite the dust is what teeth do.

My neighbor is a cosmetic dentist, you can tell from the way he keeps his lawn he is a proficient, too.

He knows teeth are designed to last a lifetime provided your lifetime is short and brutish, but his job is to extend the warranty, painlessly, with amazing glue and diamond drills, through the lengthy and lovely lives so many enjoy today.

Jung says that an archetypal dream is that we are standing over a sink and our teeth fall out of our mouths and clatter down the drain and we try to catch them but they are gone.

Turns out it's a dream about mortality.

The good news is, it doesn't bother your dog that he's going to lose everything, including his canines, which you don't brush though you know you should, though you love your dog a lot but it's kind of a bother to brush your dog's teeth and why shouldn't his ivories last the full fifteen years, when all he eats is toasted soybeans.

And the dog never dreams that dream of standing in the bathroom mirror watching his mortality clank against porcelain

because he's a dog and they are spared that, unlike you and maybe unlike the Ardipithecus lady if people were already starting to dream about teeth four million years ago in Ethiopia.

Why are we the ones haunted the way my poor neighbor the dentist is, everything has to be just the right way, on his knees in the grass on Saturday mornings in June, exhaust seething from the chainsaw in his hands, grinding away at the imperfect stump.

Tsunami

Just as the man stepped onto the stepstool and into the noose a wall of water eighteen feet at the crest swept into the room the voice of God says You can't quit, you're fired

The Blind Old Man And His Cancerous Dog

The blind man looked up while he stroked the retriever's shoulder.

He had just been informed that his companion of twelve years

had cancer of the stomach and would have to be put down.

I'm sorry to hear that," I said. "How terrible to lose your friend, that you rely on so much."

"Yeah," the blind old man said, kneading the dog's ruff.
"But I go through a lot of dogs."

Frankenstein in the Cemetery

Here is where I ought to be.

And here.

And here.

And here.

And here.

And here.

Don't Be Like The Moon

The world must carry the moon on its shoulder like a stillborn child to the grave. - Pindar

Don't be like the moon, your face all scars, dismayed by your bombardment.

Because if that is your choice,
To be just like the moon,

The night is what you will be relegated to, a lantern hanging in the darkness.

Do not be bewildered like the moon

Do not gaze open-mouthed into space

Do not dwell in memories gone bad

Be like the earth you were plucked out of,

The one that lives, that heaves and sighs Deny your losses, shed your skin,

Pack away the dead so they cannot be seen Make roses grow between the rows

Be like the blooming earth and forget

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.

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 sweetness from.

Man With a Hole

There was a man with a hole in him that he thought nothing of.

When he showed it to people, they said to him,
That doesn't look right at all.
But don't all men have holes?
the man asked.
Yes, they said, but you should really have that looked at.

Where Knowledge Goes

Does it leave you all in a moment,

We know where you go,
down into the ground,
but what of all the things you know
that gave you such pleasure,
not just to beat other people over the head with,
but just the embracing satisfaction
of knowing a thing
and having it be yours.

like a dynamited dam,
or more gently, like a sigh of information,
like wrens flying out of a bush,
thoughts inching from the ends of the hairs on your
head,
crawling out of your ears like soldiers
blinking in the bright dust that follows battle,
and wondering where to take up residence next?
There go the answers to every test question,
the punch lines, state capitols, quotations from books,
the names of birds, our high school Spanish,
multiplication tables,
the hard lessons one learns from experience
that can not be put into words,

plus the kinds of knowledge that we don't even know, the answers we are given at the last moment, the last blink of an eye, the last breath, that now must wait another lifetime.

The Murdered Reader

In a proper poem something changes.

The reader thinks a thought he never thought before, or remembers something long forgotten, or he decides, god damn it, I'm not going to think that way again.

A proper poem murders its reader.

Neurons re-bootstrap and learn.

The old reader is tossed into the dumpster,

A new reader hoists himself out.

The poem doesn't have to be anything major.

A crumb on the collar that needs brushing off will do.

A good one and the reader will be packing for Bolivia.

Because something has been added.

The old ways have been found wanting.

The murdered reader is set ablaze.

The old task completed, the new hands slap off the dust and move on.

The Druthers

I wish I was a better man
I wish I was more honest than I am

I am somewhat honest but I prefer to shade things slightly in my favor

I am fairly kind, but with exceptions as when I make bombs in the basement

My wife is right, I'm an angry guy, and negativity scares people away.

I don't know why I always play the fool --Perhaps, to avoid being useful.

I wish I could do a job just right, just once, and have it be perfect, complete.

"That guy knew what he was doing," people say.

"That's the kind of guy to be."

I wish I was the sort who radiates calm and pleasantness, and never flips the alarm.

But in fact I have this anxiety problem so wishing is what I spend a lot of time on.

Dream of Whitman

I dreamed I played basketball
with the bard of America,
he spun the globe on his finger
and said, young fellow,
you must not dwell inside yourself,
step out, step up to the world

where everything is revealed.

I stood in the rain on the bridge with him and he shouted into the din,

There is no modesty now,
no inhibition,
no deflected blows.

He clasped me around the shoulders:

My son, it all just goes!

Rotten Stump

So a tree becomes a stump and the microbes burrow in until it is all lacework a filigree of matter.

The world that seems solid

is riddled with holes,
holes between pores
and holes between cells,
holes between the molecules,
atoms and particles.

There are oceans of space within and between.
You could say we live in space.
'I'm not really here,'
I'm just saying I am.

'Beautiful Creatures,' by Bruce Cockburn

Cockburn intones the phrase "beautiful creatures,"

and his voice rises until he is like a chimney sending sparks high into the sky.

And what Cockburn is saying —
the beautiful creatures are going away.

Their beautiful eyes, their beautiful cries, the tree frog, the antelope, the radiant butterflies, the clarity of their hunger.

We will watch them go and be unable to stop them, because other things matter more.

Going away by leg, by wing, on their beautiful bellies, they are taking their beauty away from us, they are never coming back.

A Great One

I never constructed a great one with my hands, one that swept away cities like a runaway reservoir, and people did not resist the surge because the flood felt like it was their flood, Because a great one feels like it knows you already, has taken up your cause without you being awares. A great one is compassionate yet ignorant, It pays no union dues, it knows nobody's name, It is courageous because it really doesn't give a shit if it's corny and it doesn't care if it passes through the baleen of some cleaner whose job it is to filter nutrients through the narrowest possible slit A great one is like a hammer-blow to the head And the best of us feel we have been pummeled to mush,

Our heads like boiled bowling balls, pulpy

And we don't care, it's a plus in the overall profile.

A great one lays down its life for you with a laugh Because it knows it can never die, its gestures

Cost it nothing, it is in a movie of its own life

And it is playing the part of itself.

It is always flush with cash because it is of a piece with riches,

It picks up every check and leaves twenty dollar tips.

A great one is generous in its heart because that is its pedigree

Like the people who have the good things of the world.

A great one summers on the cape and winters in the mountains

Because the air is better and the company convivial

And the pinchball on the atomizer is never out of reach

So that the voice is ever liquid and the timbre ever strong.

It is ushered into the waiting limousine

And speeds away to the next great moment,

The testimonial banquet, the honorary degree,

The reception line loops back on itself like an homage to infinity.

The great one acknowledges no competitors,

As it dips its bread in the back seat bowl and mops up the wine,

Yet we stand in its wake as it shrinks to a dot, tearyeyed, choking

on the blue fumes of its burning.

An Idea to Entertain

It's a good idea to weep more.

It dissolves the salts that collect in the corners,

It flushes the rings and uncakes the pistons,

It lubricates the entire mechanism.

Maybe we should set aside time periodically

to throw ourselves on the bed and drench it with tears Like a sponge expanding, like a load of bread left out in the rain, like a ship taking on water. Sobbing and sobbing, until we scrape bottom -and maybe we should unratchet The nut on the hydrants and hose down the city with a sloshing of tears. It feels so good when it rains on the body. It stings! But it corrects the idea that the eyes are only for seeing. Maybe if you squeezed the last tears out and took a Q-tip to each cranny Till the tanks sound hollow When you bang them with a wrench And the sound shivers through you, saying empty, I am empty! And once you have had your cry, And wrung the washcloth out, when the sun evaporates the last of it, it may be time to assess our progress. Maybe you can muster the hope to be happy.

A 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)

Clints and Grykes

Clints be the islands that float apart.

Grykes be the fathoms that must be paved.

Schist be the rock that guards your heart.

Karst be the stones that cap your grave.

* Geological terms. On Ireland's Burren, a cap of limestone pushed up

from the Atlantic, called the karst. The kart is sometimes broken into two

looks – the stone outcroppings and the spaces separating them. The overall

effect is extreme inhospitality.

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 McCrea

Writers

Writers start out all right, they pay attention to things and deliver reports on the way things are,

it is a useful function they perform.

But then something happens.

Someone will say, you know, this is interesting, what you did --

and in a second you can see it all go bad.

They like the attention and so they want more and tell themselves

"I could create lots of these reports, they're not that hard to do now that I know how to do it."

And then they want readers and then they want comments and then they want praise and then they want more praise, praise dropping from the faucet night and day like an endless drip.

until they are no longer reporters, they are like debutants on a featherbed, chins in their hands and their feet waggling behind them.

"Tell me more about myself, tell me more!"
And they're not working for you any more.
You say everyone needs encouragement
but that's not true,
encouraging only encourages them.

The Complicated E

You hold out your hand, you tuck in your thumb,

See how the four fingers make a complicated E.

The E is four hatchlings singing for the dangled grub.

It is four snoozing butterflies, dreaming of the life to come.

It is the tail of a chicken hawk, grasping a mouse.

Four teats on a full bag of cow.

A wave of carrots, greeting you from the table

They are four damp tube socks clothes-pinned to a line.

The comb of the cock, that has been violated by the dawn.

A Chinese hexagram signifying a well-plowed field.

A kind of a rake, with which I maintain your lovely grounds.

They are two brides and two grooms, mad with love and dashing up the stairs.

See how the E is a naked heart now, gasping in your hand!

The Red Noodle

When you see the red noodle atop the turkey buzzard's head,

and the bird appears to be suspended in space, don't be like

the small child in the cradle, swatting at the mobile. This is a

sign to you. It is saying it's time to get up from the hammock

you have spent all morning in, and move around a little.

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 downstair,

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 is named Daniele.

We Met Only Once ~ In The Inflated Backyard Swimming Pool

Her name was Karen.

She was five and I was six.

She was wearing a little girl's swimsuit,

with a ruffled bottom.

She knelt beside me and I studied

her honey-tan legs,

her little butt resting on her heels,

the pretty wrinkle-lines on her knees,

so different from my Irish skin.

And she smiled at me

With her beautiful baby teeth,

bright daggers of pearl.

I understood then why boys wanted to

affiliate with girls,

despite the fact they were girls --

it was because of their honey-tanned legs,

and the pearly daggers of their teeth

Second Law of Thermodynamics (And Poetry)

Every event results

in a change

or else it was not an event --

typically not a lot of change,

but at the end

you are a different person

by a bit,

than you were
at the beginning,
and the world is a
different world.
Neurons cross-strap,
new understandings
and associations
are formed, forever,
and there is no forgetting now,
no going back
to the you you
were before.

On First Uncapping Stutrud's Brew

Much have I travell'd in the realms of ale,
And many handsome hops and bitters quaffed;
And many oaken kegs have I been fore and aft,
Which oracles bound to Ceres do foretell;
To the western wind have I hoisted seven sail,
Where mighty Dionysus shook and laughed;
And begged a token of hearty Falstaff,
Like a free card for getting out of jail.
How comes it that this beverage so clear
Obtains the sacred ripeness that is all,
An effervescence pyrotechnic to the ear -I drink it down and hear the holy call.
For I have supped with the gods of beer
Silent, on a Summit in Saint Paul.

At the Metrodome

Jon and I took our Brazilian guest 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, I mean.

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

Unbelievably Jon reaches up and snags it and without hesitation

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

2007

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 his life.

"Playing in the corn with Veronica in Trempealeau," he said.

"I never felt so forgiven or so loved."

Yuan Dynasty Story

How I miss the tiny footsteps on the floorboards, of the young girl Hsia Liu who took out the ashes and minded the children. I think about her shy smile, and the way she looked downward, in perfect modesty, presenting a hot pot of tea for us. When she passed through the room I could detect the faint rustle of her clothing, and when she presented herself, the quickened beating of her heart. How sad, I think, as I stir the tea I had to make myself today, we sold her to pay the mortgage on our mountain cottage, the one where she watched over our dear young ones, in the northern prefecture of H'ai Province.

Blind Spot

There is always that one place you cannot see reliably.

Things sneak up on you there.

You know that when the end comes,

it will probably appear in that space behind your shoulder

that you cannot comfortably swivel to.

So that is what you focus on,

year after year,

with a dismal, forlorn feeling,

because what can you say despite all this vigilance --

"I didn't see it coming."

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.

Little Tiny Hands

I am so touched by your tiny hands.

They are like an invitation to me to take care of you,

to protect you from harm,

to kiss your sweet small knuckles

with multiple kisses,

which is strange because the rest of you

is quite large.

Rapid Decomposition

Some people want to be mummified and have their bodies last

millennia. Others want to be buried deep in the ground, sealed

away from the worms by silk and steel.

This proposal is for the rest of you, who want to go out with a

flash, and give the world an amazing experience. Instead of

keeping the spiders and microbes and bugs away, you hold a

party and invite them all.

This is what you do. You have to bathe your body in accelerating

agents just before you die. Nitrogen and carbon are the best for

this. We suggests creating a slurry of sheep's manure and

tapwater in an outside cauldron. You want it thick, but still a little

soupy.

You lie down in a sunny spot in the garden, with aerated soil, and

you ladle about six gallons of the stuff all over you. You want a

good coating, top and bottom.

Then you die.

Dying itself is amazing. One moment your cells are firing on

target, performing trillions of molecular transfers and metamorphoses that keep you cooking in unison. Next moment,

all the lights go out, cell after cell. It's like you didn't pay the

electric. Breathing and heart rate stop. Blood begins to pool in

the lowest part of you, the ones close to the ground.

For a few minutes not much happens. But the slurry shoots out

methane and the methane is like reveille to the local biosphere.

Insects look up from what they are doing. Microbes are drawn to

you like filings to a magnet.

The gas goes out of you and you may wonder: Is this creeping

cloud what is left of my thoughts and memories? Could this be

my soul taking leave of the body?

No! It's just stinky gas. That other stuff is long gone. But consider

what it's doing. While other people are still in the freezer at the

funeral home, people blowing their noses in grief, you are going

to town. Bacteria accelerate the breakdown of your cells to

lightning speed.

You discover something remarkable. Inhalation is out of the

question, but you are exhaling like never before. You are sending

one fugue after another into the atmosphere, like that snippet in

Close Encounters of the Third Kind. You are instantly the talk of

the biological neighborhood. They ride in your direction like the

Oklahoma land rush, everyone scheming for a piece of the pie.

It's the Fourth of July and everyone is waving their flags and

shouting Oh! as you rip a great one, and then rip another. People

can't see it, but there is a grand finale going on that fills the

daytime sky. Everyone and everything wants a piece of you.

Everyone makes off with what they can carry – a cell, a fleck of

skin, a drop of blood, a pimple. There goes the neighbor's dog

with your right index finger. "I saw that Buddy! I saw what you

did!"

It's a jubilee day, with streamers and noisemakers, picnic

blankets spread upon the lawn. A brass band is celebrating your

gift to the world. Speech, speech, the gathering exclaims!

And you are moving. The biting and sucking and ripping of

membranes causes you to hum. Your face makes faces, your

tissues flinch. Every part of every part of you is causing you to

dance, like a puppet connected to a billion strings, like Bonnie,

like Clyde, like that old gospel testimony.

I hosted the feast, you seem to be saying, I partied till dawn,

everyone left with the first rays of sun, carrying a tinfoil package

in the shape of a swan.

Now isn't that better than taking it slow?

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 holding 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?

Doots In The Garden

When the fallen two had the riot act read to them, And the perfect world was going into mothballs For the remainder of history,

They already knew.

They had pooped bits of apple behind the spreading hydrangea,

the first doots ever left behind.

They two knew they could never come back.

No addition of soap makes them acceptable, they are what you always want to get far away from, the awful, the unlovable, to be shunned in every way. They trip you up and separate you from the glory that once was yours.

Freud was right on when he said doots are the badge to what it is to be human, Because doots are the truth of what it is to be you.

You are not of divine countenance any more.

You will carry this burden forever.

•

I AM GOYA, tonight at Sidhe Brewery

https://www.facebook.com/events/1468379160143111/?ref=5&action_history=null

White American poets don't have great credibility in protest

We come across as privileged
I saw a poet do it right, March 19, 1971
Russian, Andrei Voznesenski

Protégé of Boris Pasternak

In the 1960s he was as big as the Beatles in the USSR because he embodied the rage and sorrow of Soviet youth

He even wrote a book with a Beatles title, Rubber Souls

Kruschev personally asked Voznesensky, to his face, to obtain a passport and defect,

He was that challenging

He filled stadiums with his electricity and charisma,

And often, as in his great poem to Goya, the Spanish painter and critic,

He swung his arm like a steel-driving man

One critic said that he along with Yevtushenko were the first poets to write for the stage, not the page, making them the first slam poets

I met Andrei Voznesensky, and this is our story Voznesenski After 42 Years

With less than a day's notice, the KGB gave Siberian poet Andrej Vosnesenski a visa to fly to Minnesota.

There was no time to promote the event.

A handful of writers and scholars and a few Soviet emigrés

cluster in the front rows of the roped off-Northrop Auditorium,

a mere 50 people dotting the 5,000 seats while, standing like a speck upon the giant stage, the poet groans and raises his fist like a steel sledge, poised to come down hard.

He reads his famous poem about Goya, the Spanish painter of the post-Napoleonic years regarded as the last of the old masters and the first of the moderns, assailing power for its crushing offenses.

An English actor translates his words, but no one listens to that blow-dried fop.

All eyes are on the pumping hand, all ears attuned to Vosnesenski's condemnation of tyrants.

No one understands, and yet everyone understands.

And as he moves into action, one word thunders through the auditorium --

GOYA reanimates the frozen corpses of the field.
GOYA daubs you with the blood of your victims.
The dashed, the dead, the unblinking eyes.
GOYA stands against the blistering fire,
accosting you with your terrible crimes.
GOYA slams the hammer that fractures the rock.
GOYA swings the scythe that mows the grain.

Even when all the words against you are shredded Even when the books have made a roaring fire, The lies that murdered millions come back on you

GOYA is implacable against the barrels of rifles
GOYA sees you for what you are
GOYA stabs with his truth
GOYA announces that the day is over
That the whited dead cry out for justice
You mighty leaders have not prevailed
You are vanquished by your deeds
Your generations are sown with lime
You have not won, you are dead and you don't know

GOYA!

Afterward the reading breaks up and the poets and professors

drive through the snow and ice to Chester Anderson's to boast and jostle and drink,

Voznesenski alone at the end of the couch with a shy, puzzled frown on his face.

Several beers later, I take to the bathroom, where Chester's golden retriever lies on a pink poof rug. I step over the dog to pee.

Behind me, Voznesenski creeps into the room

And kneels by the dog on the pink poof rug,

a foot from the stream splashing against the porcelain lip.

He scratches the dogs ears and smiles seraphically His two eyes closed, his face held out, the dew alighting like communion from God on his face, as if finally – finally – FINALLY free!

When Poetry Paid: The Boom Years Of American Verse

Date of publication: March 27, 2000

For years I wrote poems the way everyone did.

I would sit under a tree and reflect on something. When something occurred to me I would write it down, make it rhyme, then dash it off to a literary magazine, which would pay me for the poem.

On a good day of reflecting, you could make \$500, if you were a reasonably good typist. The market was strong and the pay was good. The cliché simile in those days was "as sound as a poem."

But things changed. Masses of people turned off to poetry and turned on to television. The many millions of poetry readers dwindled to a few million. Writing schools, seeing a buck to be made, proliferated, luring

unsuspecting poets in, without telling them that their markets had disappeared.

Computers, photocopy machines, websites, ballpoint pens and unrhymed verse made poems the province of the riffraff. Rhyme, alliteration, and assonance vanished almost overnight.

Anyone could do the new poetry. But no one could make a living at it.

You see the results everywhere -- a drifting army of unemployed poets, hanging around railyards and bus depots, willing to do just about anything for a nice salad.

The best went into whatever field held allure for them -- management, ophthalmology, small motor repair. The rest taught.

As an upper-echelon poet, I would like to say I weathered this economic storm unfazed. But even I was affected.

First, my income sagged. Eventually I had to sell one of my homes; fortunately, it was one I had never visited.

Over time my Rolodex of favorite editors shrank, as one greybeard after another was driven into other professions, let go entirely or replaced by editors indifferent to poetic form.

I tried to fight back. I now reflected twice as hard as I normally did, hoping to make up the deficit in volume. Some days, I got headaches. At one point I joined the Poets Union, but I could not bear the environment of pinko collectivism.

So I came up with my own adaptation, which is to form strategic corporate poetry partnerships. My poetry agent scans the business headlines. When we identify a suitable partner, I reflect about them and write a poem that meets both our needs. The resulting poem makes a compelling observation about the natural blessings of life and imagination, plus it provides attractive product placement for the partner.

Most readers are not even aware of the arrangement.

The new approach proved a stellar success. I successfully partnered with companies in numerous industries now -- MetLife ("Actuarial Tables," Antigonish Review Vol. 47, No. 3; Dow Jones ("Head and

Shoulders," Massachusetts Quarterly; Spring 1999; and Intel ("Silicon," Poetry California, February 2000).

Three short poems, \$115,000 in fees. On the printed page the corporate poem is no different than a noncorporate poem, apart from the logo.

Some readers -- there are always skeptics -- predicted that partnering would affect the poet's voice and diminish the poem's authenticity. While I can assure them this has not occurred, and that my corporate verse is as authentic as anything I've ever written, the proof is in the eating.

To that end I provide you, these concluding and suitably profitable poetic postscripts. In the first example, I asked myself, if John Keats were to endorse a brand of beer, how would he do it? I think it would go a little like this:

On First Uncapping Stutrud's Brew

Much have I travell'd in the realms of ale,
And many handsome hops and bitters quaffed;
And many oaken kegs have I been fore and aft,
Which oracles bound to Ceres do foretell;
To the western wind have I hoisted seven sail,
Where mighty Dionysus shook and laughed;
And begged a token of hearty Falstaff,
Like a free card for getting out of jail.
How comes it that this beverage so clear
Obtains the sacred ripeness that is all,
An effervescence pyrotechnic to the ear -I drink it down and hear the holy call.
For I have supped with the gods of beer
Silent, on a Summit in Saint Paul.

Millions Demand America's Purest Silver Dollar - Shouldn't You?

These legal tender U.S. silver dollars feature

a nearly 100-year-old design of Lady Liberty striding confidently forward while draped in a U.S. flag, while the other side depicts a majestic U.S. eagle, thirteen stars, and an American shield.

But the clock is ticking. Timing is everything.

Our advice to you -- keep this to yourself.

Tear out the page if you have to, because the more people

know about this offer, the worse it is for you.

Supplies are limited and there is a strict limit of 40 per household.

It's a coin flip you can't afford to lose.

The Best Canned Corn Around

For me, there is no better way to start the day than opening a can of Libby's vacuum-packed sweet corn and scooping them up with a clean soup spoon.

You wonder how they removed so much liquid from the can

without the corn going bad.

Delectable? You can taste the soaked-up sunshine in every mouthful!

Libby's -- hot or cold, the best canned corn around

Kraken Press

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