



INSTRUCTIONS FOR FALLING

Complete Works 1966-2018

Mike Finley

Instructions for Falling

Mike Finley

Kraken Press | St. Paul

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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

Contemplating the Losses One Has Suffered Personally Along With the Misery of the Entire World Through All Time

A happy ending was out of the question.

A blessed moment to sing!

Then the rolled-up newspaper comes.

O how we howl when the pie has been eaten,
when we still have the moon.

Amends

I know now that my dad felt shame abandoning the family.

He stole, and got caught, and had to leave Ohio.

I know now he felt he was a good guy who never got credit for meaning well.

It wasn't his fault his daughter was born sick and died young.

He wasn't the reason his wife was the way she was, despising everything he did.

Later in life he undertook to make amends helping tenants along I-15 in sorry straits,

especially the young mothers, whose gratitude and affection he sought.

He even went to court and gave depositions against bad fathers who did exactly what he did.

He lent out money to pay for heat and forgave the rent, month after month.

He came to be considered a man to turn to once his second wife had bled the evil out.

For her, he gave up drinking and smoking and rare sirloin.

He teed off from the dry fairways each morning before they evaporated.

Eventually he stopped chasing the waitresses who had tempted him all of his life,

with their snug rayon uniforms, their lipstick, and the arousing way they slipped him the check.

So when a tumor sprouted around his lungs the size of a pie-plate, he felt gypped again

and cursed his luck, and in his wretchedness ratted out everyone he ever thought he loved,

including me, for remembering everything he ever said and did.

Memory

My mother used to sing off-key
while doing the wash:
'Why, oh why, oh why, oh why oh
Did I ever leave Ohio?'
And we still lived there then.

Prescription for Depression

Sometimes when I'm feeling cheerful
I listen to Shostakovich's 24 Fugues and Preludes,
either the Camelot recording, which was by himself,
from a record I recorded in 1970, with all the pops and cracks
of having played it 100 times, or the later,
equally beautiful version by Tatiana Nikolayeva.
All the frustration, heartache, censorship and death
of the Stalin era, told in off-key nursery rhyme forms.
Works every time.

The Disappeareds

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

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

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

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

Was it a warning from the world
that this is the price we must pay now,
one sacrificed by the hour
until we learn to love.

When you see a person
sobbing in the supermarket,

face held in their hands,
another one has been taken.

I'm A Better Person Than a Poet

My poetry, let's face it, is pretty weird,
with melancholy tendencies, and pronouncements
about the way reality really is that are highly debatable.
I'm always trying to control the page and make a big impression
--

how do you do art without doing that?
And there are many poems I have run away from, in shame,
because they were not what I meant to say at all,
instead some insecure tendency took over.
Whereas, as a person I am reliably cheerful,
not melancholy at all. I'm still weird,
but weird in a playful way, playing in my head.
I mean no harm, and I'm sorry when I do cause harm.
Some people think I'm trying to top them
when I'm really just seeing if they like to play.
It's just the way I am, the way my brain works.
I'm hospitable, kind-hearted and a pretty good listener.
I like to feed people eggs and hear their stories.
I hate injustice and always side with the little guy,
by which I just mean disenfranchised people.
It's a shame, really, that you're reading this poem
instead of the two of us having breakfast together.

9/29/2018

Waiting for Her Ride

She sits at the taxi stand
Out front of the clinic,
shivering thin woman,
wrapped in white blanket,
hair burned away,
puffing on a Kool.
"How you doing today?" I ask,
to be nice.
In a gravelly voice she replies
"I been better."

2012

The Wonder Was

She peered into the mirror
And wondered what the world saw
That she could not
It could size her up immediately
As unworthy of investment.
Efficient for them but perplexing for her.
Was it a look of stupidity,
Or was there a curse one could read
In the turbine of the eye,
A signal no grass would grow on this dirt,
In a moment they saw what she could not see
If she stood on tiptoe a hundred thousand years.

'Grieving orca still carrying her dead calf more than 2 weeks later'

A ceremony is underway, and people still don't get it.
The young are dying, but nobody sees, or they think
we need more counseling, more sedation,
to be put in a room, to remain silent, to be hidden away.
If we assigned volcanoes for our distressed children to leap into
we would quickly run out of volcanoes, the sacrifices
would be assigned numbers and told to go home,
sit in a quiet place until your number comes up.
Our job is to protect the people we love but how do we
protect them from a world marinating in shame,
that has given up, that accepts this culling of the young,
our perfect children the world could not make room for,
and so they beach themselves, perhaps if the numbers
keep rising, if we carry our dead children in our arms to the
store,
people will gasp and say We have to change ... everything.

August 9, 2018

Stooping to Pick Up a Pill ...

that fell to the floor and skittered under my desk.

I try bending at the back but I don't bend so good.

I slide off the chair and get down on my bony knees

but then my shoulder still keeps me from ducking under
the table, and now my neck feels like it might go out.

I get on all fours and duck my head under, and the way is clear
until

I start wheezing, and my eyes bug out, and my heart begins
to thump and that big vein pulses up top, I can even
feel the stress in my hair. But then -- there it is, my precious
Zytiga,

the pill of the gods, \$260.20 apiece on the open market,
the mud-colored pearl that keeps my cancer at bay,
now bearded weird with bunny dust. I hold the pill between two
fingers

like a host held up to chiming bells and think this magic stone
will keep me alive, unless I have to dive under this desk again.

2018

Sad Old Smile

When you're old your smile doesn't smile any more.
Even when you try hard to smile,
There's something about it, something miserable,
children scream and hide in their moms.
Flattened too many tires, bounced too many checks.
Had your heart trampled by people you counted on.
The muscles go saggy, you cannot hold up the world by yourself.
And anyway, smiles can lie just as much as words.
People are self-conscious, they know their teeth aren't so great,
so they minimize the amount of real estate on display.
Just remember, this is what the world wants you to do,
Be some old dirtbag better off in the ground,
keeping company with what you have become.
Defy that world, acknowledge only the one
that gives you one more day to draw breath,
in and out, like when you were young.

2018

Olden Times

I think of being a country boy,
and being told there are devils lurking in the dark
and no streetlights to shine on devils
and the human system of rods and cones being so lame
You cannot make things out in the dark
On top of which there are no spectacles
To correct common ophthalmological conditions
So you just can't be sure what that shadow is just up ahead
And the fact that devils are an actual true fact
And they want to mess you up for their own peculiar Purposes.
If you carried a torch or lantern it would only be good
For spotting ruts in the road, and that's about it.
In fact, its primary function is to keep the devils
informed of your location. I would pray a LOT.

Sal

I knew a guy who was brilliant and schizophrenic and had trouble saying the right thing. At my daughter's vigil, he was among the people lined up to give condolences.

I have to say, no one in the line knew quite what to say -- that's how grief is. No one ever has a clue what to say, that will soften the jagged edge of a death in the family.

But when Sal got to the end of the line he blurted out:

"Peas and carrots."

And he grinned and grimaced in the same moment.

I was in a daze myself, and squinted, showing my inability to comprehend what he said.

"Peas and carrots?"

Sal got very serious and sane for just a moment.

"I'm wishing you and Rachel and Jon PEACE for this terrible loss, and COURAGE to go on without Daniele."

In The Groove

It started with the beboppers,
they knew what it meant to find a sequence
where the mind shut down
And the playing just came, a holy state
that could not be sustained indefinitely in this realm.
It was harder for the hippies, who did not know so many chords
But they understood distortion and so they revered the term
And maybe for them it was not even necessarily musical.
A groove was a good patch in life, as opposed to a rut,
Your lady loves you and the kids haven't died,
It's a tunnel of love that transports you to happiness.
It even has implications for construction -- tongue and groove
And wherever else that image transports you to, floating,
Nodding, with no clear end in sight.

May 2018

At Dunn Brothers

I'm at the coffee shop with Rich and I am looking around
at the people reading and playing with their phones,
and I say to him, you know, Rich, because I'm sick,
I'm really aware that everyone around me is dying, too.
We're all headed to a pretty sorry end.

These people here, they are dying but they act like nothing's
happening.

A part of me wants to go from table to table and say to people,
Hi, do you know that death is coming for you?

What are you doing about that fact?

And Rich leans across the table and whispers to me,
"Mike, I don't think they want you to tell them that."

2018

I Did A Bad Thing

I dropped a bag of dog poop in my neighbor's trash.

I knew it wasn't nice, but I thought, it's trash, right?

Next day a note in big letters on the dumpster:

"Whoever dropped dog dirt in our trash,
please do not do this disgusting thing again!"

Feeling bad, but also curious --

I mean, why would anyone care so much? --

I crept up to the barrel and opened the lid.

It was an Elizabethan theater inside,
and finger-sized musicians were fiddling and
little men and tiny woman were dancing arm in arm.

I thought of the horror of my zip-locked load,
all this happiness so brutally extinguished.

I walked the dog another way, thinking,
"Well, now I understand."

May 2018

Last Visit with Betty Pat, 2017

for Elizabeth Patricia Leach, 1925-2018

I told her I always thought of her as my other mother.

She cared about me, she counseled me,

she showed me love and respect.

If I could use a meal, she made sure I was fed.

"That's nice, Mike," she said, "but why is it

I only see you about every ten years?"

I replied: "I didn't say I was a good son."

2108

My Method

I had no idea how other boys did it.

But, just going by dances and hallway behavior

They seemed to get by by acting tough, in control,

Disclosing little, putting out a mask of confidence

That was in fact quite fragile.

C.J. Banjoff was the most masculine guy in school.

He strutted and sneered, a poor guy with ambition

And apparent talent. But when a girl said no to him

He pulled out a gun at the drive-in movie

And blew out his brains -- the first of us to go.

Because boys are vulnerable and so much is at stake --

Their reputation, their future, their ability to survive

Against a world of unfeeling competition.

I had to reason to feel confident, either,

And I was younger than them because I skipped a grade,

And my development came slow -- I never quite bristled

And this was a source of considerable concern.

So I chose another way. I didn't try to wow girls

With my muscles or by blowing smoke and acting mean.

I treated them with unexpected seriousness.

Connecting with my -- let's just say it --

My fathomless blue eyes -- prettier than most of theirs!

It was all there, deep down in the pools of the eyes,

Compassion, understanding and fun that threatened to be profound.

I looked at them the way they wished their fathers did,

Just once, like no one had looked at them before.

I knew who they were, or I found out who they were,
And the promise I made was that from this moment on
They would feel known, they would have someone
To open their hearts to, I could absorb all their pain
And heal them with my comprehending gaze.
I had a system for getting them to want me
And I did fairly well, statistically, in the front seat,
In the backseat, in the tall grass alongside the highway.
Forget the others, I told them with my eyes.
You will never know another love like this.
I alone will love you the way you need.
They gave themselves to me sweetly,
And we leaned across to one another and we met.
I forgot to mention I also had a car.
Plus my family ran a saloon.

Ritalin

I don't know just where I'm going
But that way is north
And I can't be but a block or two from home.
Look at that sunshine sparkling through the treetops,
And how about that robin hopping by the hedge
I tell you things aren't quite the same
When the Ritalin is in my blood
I'm in a sailor's suit and cap
Going from this sidewalk to that
Cause when the Ritalin starts to flow
I really don't care so much
I have made a big decision to to take
A walk in the neighborhood every day it's nice
Take pictures of funny things I see
And put them up on Facebook
For all my friends to see
Ritalin, it's my life, and my wife
Likes seeing me so cheerful and upbeat
The politicians are making ill-advised sounds
But I really don't care about them so much
Just you and your pinwheeling eyes
And the secret of our happiness

Servicing the Heart

You must not ignore it, it requires your attention.

See that it is regular.

Remind it you are in this thing together.

When there are signs of trouble, intervene.

A tired heart needs encouragement.

Praise it for its efforts, sympathize with its moments of uncertainty.

What does it know, it is sealed away under the bars of the chest.

It only knows what you tell it.

A soft massage may restore its confidence.

In extreme cases, it may need cleaning out.

Put it to your lips and blow it like a shofar,

all the hearts in hearing distance will turn and look.

Soak it in Joy and warm water and wring it out tight.

Flush every drop of pain from its chambers.

Every bit of goo,

And remember -- if you drop it,

should it happen to break,

consider it sold.

May 2108

Young Woman at Franklin & Cedar Wearing a T-shirt that Says 'Choose Peace'

Young woman, it's a great message but no one can read it without noticing your young breasts nudging the T-shirt.

World peace is great. Political peace here at home, fantastic.

But I suspect many people will read other suggestions into the words.

Look at you -- slender, with a red streak flashing through your dark hair.

Your skirt is slit, so as you enter the crosswalk we get a glimpse of thigh, thigh, thigh.

It's 8 am, you are going to work. You are wearing that T-shirt where you work.

Married women don't dress this way. They're exhausted with that game

and have taken shelter under a strong tree. Sexy T-shirts and ruby lipstick

no longer play a role in their lives. Maybe you are a devastating personality

who can slash in half the men who pause to make a remark. Maybe

you have been doing this for years and are great at defending yourself.

Maybe you are crazy and just enjoy the look in men's eyes when they see you.

I hope it works for you and the warlike pause when they see your T-shirt

and that glimpse of thigh, and melt their swords and AK47s into plowshares and school lunch boxes.

Maybe peace will break out because your eye shadow broke the aggressive mentality in two.

But I have to tell you, based on experience, I doubt that will happen.

Bad Day

When you have a bitter experience

It is easy to lash out.

Is this why God made you, to suffer so?

So you offer it up to Jesus, who suffered so.

These are poetic notions, but they are not logical.

Some days are fun and others are not.

It's a mixed bag, admit it.

And even as far as Jesus goes,

So far as we know,

He only had that one bad day.

2010

Dermoid Cyst

I saw a boy seated on the back seat of a second class bus on a rocky road leading out of Guatemala's Peten Jungle.

He had a dermoid cyst on his forehead.

It looked like a crab trying to hatch out of an egg, with bristles and, astonishingly, teeth.

In is the only one I have seen in my life.

A dermoid cyst is a noncancerous growth that contains cells from all over the body -- skin, hair, teeth and sweat glands.

It is a mistake that begins at conception, in which embryonic cells get the wrong instructions and combine.

They usually start on a person's face, on a baby's face, as an innocuous gray sac, but growing over time into a monstrous everything-goes event.

They can be scooped out with a scalpel but often leave craters as awful as what is taken away.

You only want a skilled American dermatological surgeon to undertake this.

But this boy, bouncing from side to side with his companions, was light years from a dermatological surgeon.

He had had to endure the insults, teasing, and superstitions regarding this monstrous aperture in his forehead.

He has a mother and a father who love him, and who must know the pain he is feeling. His pain is magnified in them.

In his community, he may be considered cursed or diabolical - shunned, or tormented.

Bristles poking out an oyster, spars of broken quartzite poking through, a third eye that was not an eye, a sinkhole boring into the head.

I looked for only two seconds, but he caught me and returned the look, defiantly.

So many people are hurt in the world, that will never be made right.

Pray that God does not touch your child with this gift.

I'm Not A Good Person

When Daniele died, I found myself having critical thoughts
about people

Who spoke to me about their grief.

They would come up to me at the reception and say

Words fail me.

Words fail me is sort of interesting but it isn't true, you know.

You are saying words when you say Words fail me.

If they are failing you, it's because they are false on the face of it.

What you are really trying to impart is that you are confused
and wretched,

Unable to think well, unable to accept the bad thing that has
happened,

barely able to draw a breath.

The phrase comes up short because it is striking a pose --

You search for words, like a dancer in a play, but they do not
come, and so you are bereft.

Sad face.

So say that. I want to believe in a sensible world where events
have meaning,

And the people I love are not splattered forever by some
incomprehensible impulse.

some rocks tumbling pointlessly from the sky.

I'd give \$2500 to go back to the way things were just days ago,

And plot a course around this disaster,

But now it's too late. The terrible thing has happened.

You are marked for life with the shit of it.

I am marked for life with the shit of it.

All I can do is put my arms around you and sob

At the shittyness of it and how dreadful it must be to be you.
Or, if you have greatness inside you, the tears will spring from
you
like warm salty tea, they will rain down on us
and make a mess of our shirts, our complexions, our hopeless
demeanors,
But somehow you will be able to look me in the eyes and say
Jesus, Mike, what a lovely kid she was.

2018

A Drive In The Country

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

1954

Ann and Joe McManamon were both lawyers,
Unusual in those days.

My mother was just a waitress
so she valued Ann, and wisely
because she went on to become a judge
and Joe headed up the Cleveland police force.

They had money and connections.
But one day Ann McManamon
looked at me, age three, sitting in the grass,
and started to laugh.

Look at those legs! she said,
with her hand over her mouth.
Will you look at those funny little legs?

And my mother, frown lines forming,
did not talk to Ann McManamon
for the next year.

1979

1955

Upon completing our educations
we planned to be cowboys
or at least the sidekicks of ones.

Everywhere I went I took pictures
with my head.

Blackberries by the roadbed.

Uncle in the garden.

I remember the boardwalk splintering
and the mirror in the barber shop breaking
and people yelling and jumping
into the river.

The car stalled on a hill and started
rolling backwards.

I smoothed my fringe, and the mountain
in the tomato patch
grew and grew.

1977

Also in 1955

I hated going to mass when I was 5.

It was so boring, and all in gibberish.

I liked the smells but that was about it.

I don't know why we went, we weren't Catholic,

Except my dad, who wasn't very,

But he had a mom who was.

That's when I started playing with my hands.

I saw how the people folded theirs.

Folding was nothing!

I could do "Here is the church, here is the steeple,"

I could cross fingers, fan them out, rotate them in an gearlike fashion.

My mom would give me an alarmed look,

Like what in the world was the matter with me,

But I could not be more pleased.

I believed what I was doing was more pleasing to God

than all the indifferent prayers people muttered around me.

Until puberty I believed I was God's Favorite Person,

After, of course, his son Our Lord Jesus.

After that all bets were off.

Dad's Titty

Infant daughter in my arms
plucks absently at my nipple.
A smile forms -- she gets the joke,
Her dad is like her mom,
Only useless.

1984

How It Works

We are seed fluff that has been blown on,
We part company with one another
And float into the aloneness.
We wander so long
Borne aloft by breath, aching
To see one another again
Yearning to be stitched together at the foot
And it is like that until one day we come to rest
And realize that we carried the nucleus
Inside us all along, that we arose
From the core of a golden sun
And the day of blooming
Has been gathering inside
The whole while

2002

Big Sneeze

You want it to happen, you don't want
to be teased by the thing --
almost there, it's almost there, nearly there,
oh Christ it's disappeared!
like a coaster rolling back to the launch.
But when it does come it is devastating --
the eyes clench shut,
there is no question of modulating or stifling the thing.
You don't control it, it has you in its fist,
If it wanted to it could go on a rampage,
bisecting pedestrians, defoliating cats,
pulling pins from hand grenades, shattering houses
With its oceanic wall of shock
uttering the unutterable to the loved and unloved alike,
and afterward, mopping up the splatter,
your sanity restored,
eyes blinking at the familiar faces --
what can you say to the scattered fallen,
and how can they respond except
Bless you.

2009

Whale

What are the people supposed to do?
Some walk down to the beach each day
to behold the great thing huffing on its chin.
Children and adults pull on its fin
as if they could drag that
black immensity back into the sea.
Others form a bucket brigade
fetching seawater to keep its skin
from splitting open and infection entering.
The oceanside women weep at its passing,
they wring their hands and cry,
What is this happening for? What is it trying to tell us?
I know there is nothing really to be done.
The giant creature is saying to us, What do you expect?
What other way could there be?
At night I lie alongside it on the sand,
face up, my head in my hands,
we two breathing together -- for a while.

The Friend

Those who are going are unable to go on their own.

They plead with you to help.

Their eyes are crazy, looking every which-way,

and you lay them on their side

and they pant like a leaky bellows,

their teeth are bared, their tongue is swollen

like a foot in the mouth.

You stroke them purposefully

so they know you are with them,

That you will take care of them even if

the brain can no longer see.

You make it plain you will not leave them,

not even to fetch water from the tap.

They respond to you with gratitude

because you are doing something

and that is all they want now, your firm determination,

Even though they never mouthed the words,

to be with you, they will feel the reassurance

of your hand, the hand they have loved,

till darkness comes and

the heartbeat quiets.

2009

Newsroom Baby

I was news editor, putting each day's paper together.
My copyeditor partner was Janet,
tall and dark and modestly beautiful.
She was married, and so was I, with Rachel,
but I fixed great admiration upon her.
She was never less than competent and discreet --
but yet her eyes, and I'm thinking my eyes, too,
insinuated the pleasure we gave one another.
Her husband was Dennis, a lean man --
Which Shakespeare was right, it's never a good thing --
who spoke sharply and seemed always to be cross
as if I had wronged him by being who I was,
We pretended to be friendly, but I was quick
to judge him as, in fact, a dick.
I worked in a room of competitive young men,
who resented me for taking
the job that they wanted. I never won them over.
And yet, when Janet had a son, a little fellow
who put in four-hour shifts every news day
under the desktop beside me,
in the darkness and the Teletype dust,
never once, in six months, did he cry --
What a boy! I would look up from the clatter
and banging of the newsroom, and see
those little arms moving among the blankets.

The Shiny Penny

There was a shiny penny in the pocket of the king,
the king who liked to fiddle with his fingers,
until the seam came open, the seam of his velvet pants,
and the penny slid through and down the king's leg.
It bounced off his foot and rolled on down the street,
collecting bits of murky business on his coppery face.
His momentum slowed after rolling through a road apple,
and the penny, weighted down with dirt, began to shimmy
on a brick, when a cart sped by and splashed him
upright again, careening toward the gutter grate,
and the penny tumbled into the dark,
falling past the splashing rocks, down into the bowels of the
earth,
where a passing demon stooped to brush it off
and restore it to circulation.

2002

Chapparal

Miles from a town,
half a Monopoly board
Pinned in the branches
Of a scrub oak.
Coyote yowls --
the game ended here.

Hooray for Dying

Without it we'd be lazy things,
unafraid of what the next day brings.

We would put things off today
because what's the hurry anyway?

Our love would mean little,
and the world would fill up with us
faster than it does.

Dying is the redeeming fire.

It is the pearl of great price.

Dying tells us who we are.

It turns out we are just us.

It is the source of poignancy.

When our adored says no,
death rejoices because now
it gets all of you.

It is the cleaner-upper.

Scrubbing away the toughest stain.

It guarantees relief for every living man.

We might never look at one another
with tears in our eyes and thus
never quite see who we are.

Hey Girl

My girl is red hot

Your girl ain't doodly squat

I know what it is to be loved

beyond your worth

There is nothing other

like it in the earth

I know what it is to laugh

I know what it is to take a bath

In beauty until you bawl

And you could see the glory pall

Hey girl standing

in the doorway crying

I know you tried your best --

So let it rest

My girl was red hot

But lucky -- she was not

Opportunity Costs

In business it means, if you invest in one thing,
what does that prevent you from investing in instead?
And after you decide this thing,
any investment you make is said to be sunk,
gone, swallowed up by the earth.
You are never going to get it back,
any more than you can leap backward
from the pool to the diving board.
Everything goes forward, it's the only way we know.
And that's how life is, opportunities selected
and actions, once taken, that are irreversible,
which gives every breath we take,
every teardrop, every sigh, new meaning.

2007

Dick's Mix Tape

My stepdad's star cytoma caused something to change in his brain.

This man who said "That's the bullshit" anytime you tried to thank him

was suddenly exposed to every pang and feeling.

This man whose head had been irradiated till he could no longer swallow or salivate now fought against showers of dry tears.

He spent his days in bed, his dick in a catheter and his eyes fixed on the trees outside his bedroom window, and the birds springing from branch to branch.

I made him music, which he never much enjoyed before, and played it in a loop, so it swept over him like waves, melancholy piano, luminous harp, invisible hands clapping in time.

Why do people say avoid sentiment, don't be trashy, don't go slumming with your emotions

When the right thing to do is obviously to hold one another in the corniest way, weeping and laughing and professing our love.

"I didn't know it could be like this,"

was the last thing Dick said to me, clasping my hands in his.

"I didn't know," he said -- gratefully.

Consider a Woman

If you would have someone to look at dreamily all day
I recommend a woman.

Women are pretty, everything about them looks better.
They have more emotional depth than men.

Plus they are intelligent, thoughtful, compassionate,
and surprisingly slow to violence.

In addition to these things they are natural multitaskers
because we make them do everything.

2007

By the Mighty Oak Tree

I called to my young poodle Lucy, who was standing behind a thick oak tree in the park. I could only see her back legs and stomach, which seemed to be pulsing.

I called to her again. "Lucy!"

She did not come. I frowned. It is important to teach a dog to hear the master's voice and attend to it.

Otherwise we will be leash-bound all our lives.

And here she was, ignoring me on the other side of the oak.

Dismayed, I strode to where she was, walked around the stout oak to see her, picking pink chunks of vomit from the ridged oak bark with her teeth, and gulping it down.

I pictured a drunk leaning against the old tree in the dark and losing a festive evening's ham sandwich.

"Goddamn it, Lucy!" I cried. And I did not say the following but I thought it:

"This is not what you are called to, licking vomit off a tree trunk. You were called to be a beacon to other dogs, a bright light directing them to grace and gladness."

But Lucy was not hearing me. She trotted away from the offered leash, and followed me across the park from a discreet distance, pausing periodically at the base of other oaks.

You could tell that, being young, she was hoping that ham salad with pickles grew from the ridges of every mighty tree.

Kathy's Grave ~ 2012

The oldest stones in the cemetery are at a slant,
The words have been blown away by wind,
Filled in with green and orange lichen.

Here is my sister's stone, set firmly
in the creekside ground in 1961
at St. Joseph's Cemetery in South Amherst, Ohio,
tilting like it wants to topple.

It is too heavy for me to put right,
and there is no caretaker here to appeal to.

Kathleen, you would be 67 today
but for that stupid leaky heart.
I still think of you every single day,
and the love you gave so easily,
so cheerfully, as if life would last forever,

But it's not in my power to straighten this stone
or do anything to show I still care.

2006

Last Trip to Cleveland

At the lunch counter in Amherst, Ohio, I peer into the tool bag I brought along with me. I set my pill sorter on the table in front of me. It's a plastic green box with seven compartments that snap into place. Each compartment contains the pills I'm to take on that day of the week. The pill sorter keeps me from having to take 12 bulky pill bottles with me on the road.

Six of the seven compartments are empty. They had opened up in the bottom of the bag, and all the medications spilled out and are mixed in now with the batteries, spare change, and other assorted junk I keep in the bag. It would be a drag to locate all the spilled pills, identify them – hypertension, diabetes, anti-depressant, potassium, aspirin, Vitamin D – and put them back in order.

What can you do? I sigh.

I had packed the pills for a four-day trip to the Cleveland area, with my buddy Danny Klecko. I grew up in Amherst, 30 miles west of Cleveland, and I had begged my contacts in the area to invite me back for a homecoming sort of reading. I'm a poet, and I played a small role in the history of underground poetry in the Cleveland area back in the 1960s. Since I was still at it, years after other writers fell by the wayside, I figured that made me a witness to something epic. I presented myself as the old man from Minnesota who knew where the bodies of the beatnik past were buried.

We had come to shoot a few holes and blow people's minds. Klecko was dismayed in the trip down to realize I had brought no Dylan. How could we *be* Dylan – assertive, confident, weirdly powerful – without his voice inside our heads?

We drove down on Saturday – a 13 hour tour. The reading would be two days later, Monday night. Which meant I had a day and a half to kill in a town I had not slept in for 50 years.

We stayed in the basement apartment of Gerri and Dave Rice. I have known Gerri since she was 4 and I was 7 – a brainy, willful, charismatic girl even then. She was a rare thing, pretty but not especially aware of it. She had a complicated expression, joy to be in the game, but also a shadow of sadness there, the idea that things don't always break right. I like her a lot.

Among other things she does, she designs fascinating living spaces. The house seems like it might be made of gingerbread. Every square inch has been thought out, then solved in some eccentric way. The space we were staying in included, among other things, three xylophones and 22 cuckoo clocks.

Some kid hits a high fly toward me in left field. It's 1959.

I look up and I am lost. I can't see the ball but I can see the near future. Teammates throwing their gloves in the dirt in disgust. Way to go out there, Finley.

I turn my back to the ball and stumble in the unmown grass. Poof -- I feel the ball landing in the hollow of the glove. A one-handed, back-to-the-plate catch.

I want to slow time down and tell everyone about each tick of the clock as I stood out there in the dying sunlight.

We get ice cream at Zimmerman's and I keep my mouth shut. But I am dying, dying to brag.

On the ride home, I announce to my dad and brother, "Boy I was as surprised as anyone by that catch!"

But no one wants to hear. I have worn people out with my consciousness.

All the way home I toss the game ball from one hand into the well-oiled pouch.

Sunday morning I wanted to make the rounds of meaningful places. I wanted to show Danny the key locations of my youth – where I lived, where I attended schools, the tiny downtown, the cemetery where my sister Kathy was buried when she was 15.

There was a problem with showing points of interest as if they were the Stations of the Cross. Every site is a mythological moment, in the grand story that is me. “Here on Woodhill Avenue is where a bully knocked me off my bike, age 11. That bully isn’t living anymore.”

It was embarrassing showing him the dramatic moments that could only matter to me. And really, what was there to see? The 2015 versions of my old places bore little resemblance to the places in my memory. The apple trees surrounding my house were cut down a half-century ago. Strangers stepped out of my memorial places and got into their cars. Now was different from then. Let it go, Mike. Let it go.

But I needed my moment at all these places, to fix them in my mind. It was, stupidly, everything to me. Danny was a fine sport about it, but he sensed the fracture in time the same as me – a bridge of meaning only I could traipse over.

I could howl, beat my chest, pull tufts of grass from the lawn and hurl them at people. But it only mattered to me.

Marty Plato, Gerri’s brother, had a bone to pick with me about my piece on his brother Paul, who died years ago of a kind of lung cancer.

“I didn’t like what you said about Paul’s cancer,” he told me over beer.

Paul was my pal. We delivered newspapers together. We smoked Swisher Sweet cigars that we stole together. We dated together. We barfed together. In 1968, we met in LA and I drove him to his ship in Long Beach.

I wrote in my poem that Paul might have got sick from the hundreds of barrels of chemicals my stepdad had him truck across northern Ohio. I blamed Ohio for being so polluted.

I felt that Marty thought I had no standing, as a friend who had deserted the area 50 years earlier, to stick my head in and have an opinion about the cancer you could actually see, like a red castle ring, smack dab on the skin of his chest.

Where did I get off making a pronouncement about their Paul? Who was I?

"Paul's doctor told us the lesions were consistent with napalm poisoning," Marty said.

I hadn't thought of that. My old pal Paul, killed by Vietnam. God damn it.

Under the apple trees, 1959.

Our dad ordered Pat and me to mow the yard, but the mower was a self-driven one and it dragged us after it. We could not control the thing as it lunged forward, skidded over the fallen apples, swerving and sawing, scalloping the fallen apples with its blades, each apple crying out as it was split in half, and sprayed the slash around our ankles while we pushed.

Then the yellow jackets would sneak into our pant legs and sting us good. The rest of the time the machine never ran, and our dad would hike up his pants and prostrate himself on the slab peering up at the glass gas-ball, Emory board the sparkplug gap, and crank the cord.

But that mower was never going to stop. Patrick and I had broken it with our minds.

I parked the car by the old quarry. Klecko didn't know whether to stay in the car or follow me.

I talked about trees.

That's the thing that hits me hardest, I say. They cut down the orchard. They cut down the windbreaks. Every tree that towered over me as a kid is gone.

But look at this.

We stood atop the old quarry wall, traffic zipping just behind us.

Astonishingly, the old quarry – 1200 hundred feet long and 750 feet across – was gone.

How does a hole disappear?

In this case, it filled with water. Rainwater and spring water had filled the hole, so it was now a very cold, very deep, rectangular lake.

The trees that grew from the quarry floor were submerged.

We stood staring at this impossibility, Klecko and me, in the shade of a telephone pole, for about 20 seconds and moved on.

I always go to the graves. I'm not sure why. Though I loved my big sister Kathy, who died at 15 in 1961, I no longer know how to talk to her. I was old enough to be her grandfather now. I long ago stopped bemoaning the eff-up of her dying from a visit to the dentist, bemoaning that she never kissed a boy, never bounced a baby on her knee.

Still she was my sweet sister, the person in my family I felt closest to. She was kind and good, but so fragile.

I tell Gerri over coffee that I visited the grave, out at St. Joe's cemetery on Middle Ridge Road. It was nice, I said, but the grave is tipping over. None of the other graves were tilting, but Kathy's was. It didn't mean anything, it was just another imperfect thing, the Second Law of Thermodynamics doing its magic, every mountain eventually crumbling. I just didn't think it would happen so fast – it's only sat on lumpy ground for 54 years.

Gerri says, "I have some gravel in the garage, and a crowbar to lift the grave. I'll go out there today."

I washed dishes in my stepdad's restaurant for seven years, starting at age 11.

It's by far the best job in a restaurant. The cooks are up to their elbows in anguish, racing to meet their exacting requirements. The waitstaff are scribbling salad orders. The barkeep pretends to listen to stories, rinsing out the last customer's glass. The coat check stares from her darkened box.

But the dishwasher warms his blood at the wrists.

And it goes to his heart like wonderful liquor --

everyone yelling, but he doesn't hear.

The reading is at Mahall's, a bowling alley in Lakewood, just next door to Cleveland. Twenty lanes, ten on the ground floor and ten more below. I worried that the crack of the pins would overwhelm the reading, in a dingy, bombed out side room. But on this August day in 2015, not one ball is bowled. We have the place to ourselves.

At the reading, Mary Miller and her daughter Elizabeth sit right in front of me. They remind me of all the nights I spent in their parlor, wooing Liz's sister Julie, the girl I loved, but not very well.

She was seventeen, two years older than me, and there was nothing she didn't know. I was raised in a family of know-it-alls, but her knowledge was real, it was art and literature and beauty. I so wanted to impress her as worthy.

Julie was theatrical. When I was mad at her I told her she gushed. She could not laugh without putting her hand over her bosom. And she laughed like Sarah Bernhardt must have laughed. I learned about Sarah Bernhardt from her.

The night Julie and I kissed under the spreading catalpa tree – which took me three months to get around to – I broke away from her and laughed, and dashed away, skipping violently home, up and down the Park Avenue hill.

At Mahall's I looked out at strangers and old friends and read about falling out of my mother's car as she rounded a turn in Olmstead Falls in 1955.

The centrifugal force of my mom's hard left turn caused the car door to open. And out I tumbled. I remembered everything. I missed the rear wheel entirely, and rolled down the tall grass of the shoulder.

I encountered no obstacles along the way. In the poem, my mother raced down the slope to pick me up, castigating herself for several seconds before obtaining a promise from us kids that our dad need never know about this.

I looked out at my aunts in the dark room – Elaine and Irene. I repeated my mother's name to them, just them, the name they loved. Mary Mulligan Konik. Mary Mulligan Konik. I nodded at them when I said it. I looked every one of them in the eye.

I sit in the car at the curb out front of the house. What happened to the Chinese elm, I wonder, the one that stood atop the terrace? The one my dad said goodbye to me under.

The house is still there. The closest apple tree would have been about here. This is where the cars and pickup pulled up, late at night, headlights left on, and us kids gathered by the upstairs window.

Two men threw a thick rope and pulley over a branch and began to yank. A body rose up off the truck bed. In the bright headlights the blood looked black.

It was a deer. It had jumped in front of our mom's Chevy hours earlier, and totaled the car. There was my mother, weeping into a terrycloth towel. There was our landlord, Charley Thomas – why was he up in the middle of the night, sharpening his long butcher's knife on a brick?

Charley Thomas stepped forward, instrument in hand. He split the deer up the middle, went in with his hands, stabbed around, planted his hands around something, then pulled.

The deer's heart tumbled like a bag of groceries onto the black grass.

The half hour I spent talking to Julie in 2014, when she could no longer speak, and the tumor had grabbed all her brain, was torture to me.

But I had to talk to her because I felt like she had called me to life, made me feel almost as goddamn special as she thought I was.

You gave me everything, I said to her. You made me like myself. You were my best, good friend.

Good night, my darling, I whispered to her that afternoon, as the call came to an end, calling from my cubicle.

I'll see you on and on.

I led the people at Mahall's through an audience participation number.

Repeat after me, I said. HOW ... HOW GOOD ... HOW GOOD OF A GUY HOW GOOD OF A GUY WAS HE?

Then I finished for them: He worried that the flesh-eating bacteria were not getting enough.

I almost always do this piece. It gives people a chance to shout at a poetry reading.

It's nasty. And yet, it's about Jesus.

I drive Klecko through Lorain, which has been in steady decline for 50 years. The entire city is still. You don't even see immigrants now. That's how broke this city is.

First the Ford Plant closed down then US Steel -- 40,000 jobs, neutroned away.

We pass the boarded-up shopping center on East 28th Street in Lorain. This center, which once featured two busy grocery stores, a Kroger's and a Fisher-Fazio, shut down in the 1980s.

Store clerks used to battle to recover carts on the blacktopped lot. We called it the Miracle Mile as a joke -- there was no miracle in sight.

Eerily, they painted the whole structure orange, like it was radioactive.

Klecko is awed by the emptiness, and takes selfies amid the orange debris.

All that remains open is a corner shop: Family Dollar -- Every Item \$0.89.

"Your family is amazing," Klecko tells me. "Your town is amazing. Ohio is amazing."

Klecko is of Polish extraction -- but in Minnesota that doesn't mean much. In Cleveland he can look up the street and down the street and see one Slav after another. Every Polack in Cleveland naturally knows things Klecko has to improvise on his own.

He is amazed at the flinty nature of my family. He loves the broken streets and tape-scarred windows. The screaming bridges of downtown Cleveland and the rusting hulks of the deserted steelyards move him.

“Coming to Cleveland was the coolest thing ever.”

I drive the first shift, to the Indiana border.

I had wanted to come to Cleveland like a hero who had left, done well, and perhaps perform some miracle cures.

Instead I found such a deep fondness. People remember my mom. They remember Dick and what a mighty and kind man he was.

And yes, they remember Pat and me, and our brother Brian, whom our mother, working three jobs during the 60s, fought to protect from Ohio. We were princes, set aside for better purposes.

I never set foot in the Ford plant or the steel plant or even the quarry, except to trespass.

People remember, and I remember.

And I have faith. I know, for instance, that Gerri made it out to the cemetery that day.

She dragged a bag of white stones with her.

This 105-pound woman used a crowbar to lift the 300-pound rose-colored stone, resting it on a cinderblock.

She filled in the uneven soil with stones. Then she lowered the grave back into place. And tested the job with the level.

I saw the look on her face when she promised it would be done. And I never doubted.

Money For Nothing

My little boy is less than a year,
he can barely take a step across the floor.
But he hears the riff and commences to dance.
He holds my fingers in his tiny hands
as he struts his diapered stuff,
thrusting with the beat, he is charged
with the glory of rock and roll.

1989

The Woman in the Whole Foods Parking Lot

The parking lot was full except for one space.

I edged toward it and then saw her idling nearby.

I waited four seconds, she did not move,

so I eased into the spot.

"Oh," she said gaily to me as I exited the car,

"you must not have seen my turn signal!"

Glumly, I protested. "I waited but you didn't turn."

She laughed magnanimously and marched
through the slush toward the clothing recycling bin.

When I returned to my car, she had peeled

the magnetic peace symbol my daughter

had given me years ago for my birthday

from the bumper and stuffed it into the door handle.

Spit on the Griddle

As a kid on the farm I was amazed when the wood stove fired
up

and unlike a regular stove where only the burners get warm
this entire stove was seething from every pore.

When Grandma wasn't looking I would lean

in toward the glowing cast iron and spit

on the surface, and watch the little

blob dance like a clown going

Ow! Ow! Ow! Ow! Ow!

and hiss until, like

the farm itself,

it was no

more

.

2007

Gozilladon and Me

We found the egg in the garage
And decided to just let it be.
Then it hatched and the chick
Broke free like the sound
Of a train going off a high bridge.
The first thing it saw,
Holding a garden edger by the door, was me.
Now it follows me everywhere,
Dragging power lines around its ankles.
I take the same route to work each day,
To restrict the damage to a poor neighborhood.
I threw a stick once without thinking
And it returned with a watertower in its teeth.
At night I turn off the lights
But leave one venetian blind open
So it can see me from the street.
It lies vigilantly across twelve neighbors' lawns
And only wants to keep its yellow eye upon me
because I am the treasure of its life.

Le Train Envers

(The wrong train)

You watch the board with the flipping
numbers
And suddenly it is your train and
you race
To the gate, dragging your suitcase
behind you
And you find the last car and you climb
up the steps
And collapse in your seat as the train
pulls out.
For an hour all is well, the countryside
Clicking by you.
Then you are in Poitiers and the train
starts to slow
And you are seized with fear because you are
on express to Paris,
There should be no stops – the horror
hits you.
You have boarded the
wrong train.
You glance about at the other
passengers.
How lucky they seem, to be going where
they are going,
And not having to call Jean-Paul in the night
and say
Come get me, dear cousin, I'm in Brussels,
I think.

2008

Baby Danger

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

Passenger on
Two frightened adults
And a small sleeping girl.

Ultrasound

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

Alfred Hitchcock

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

Tumbling Tumbleweed

Bounding softly across the indigo prairie at night,
the tumbleweed stop at the mighty Missouri,
momentum stalled by a cyclone fence.

Sure, these plantforms traveling eastward
looked forward to a lit-up world of sights and stimulation,
there were dreams of arriving en masse in Times Square
But now they're stuck in Chamberlain forever.

Monograph

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

1977

Peeler

I stood on a stepstool in 1959 at the sink,
peeler made of the same stuff as knives,
and me so fast and so true like an angel
peeling potatoes at twice the speed of light
the tubers flying skinless and glistening
bobbling out of my hands and into the tray,
certain I could not be sliced into because of
the ingenious angle of the blades
when I struck flesh.

Kachunk and the blood spurted into the air,
writing my name in Roman letters.
me staring at my scalloped finger enrapt
till the stool he stood on gave way
and his chin banged onto the porcelain lip

Severed fingertip wrapped in a terrycloth
unsavable even by modern surgery,
save the boy, they said -- save the boy
and there he sat in a hum of shock
coarse thread stitching the hole in him together
and tied in a stiff surgeon's knot

and what became of the pointing finger,
black smoke huffing from the hospital incinerator
hot belly roaring from its meat fed meal
he who hacked himself lolling off to sleep
and the accusing digit now pointless and blunt
just wanting to know why why why

Put-Out Day at Camp Wijiwagan

The Y girls stream into the mess hall,
Braids bouncing, teeth flashing,
It's departure day for their weeklong trip,
Paddling into the Boundary Waters and on into Canada,
And it is all I can do to stir weak coffee and not stare.
They are long and limber like golden Q-tips
Waiting to be sprung. Their cheeks are ruddy
And their confidence high. Even the ones
who don't think they are wonderful, are anyway.
You can just make out the women they will become
one day, they will hold up well
Against disappointment, against men,
The way we make demands of the dawn.
This one can't stop twirling the ribbon in her hair,
And clapping her hands like a monkey's cymbal.
If I were to look into her flashing eyes,
Up close, and see the power lit up inside
I would have to run away yelling Look out,
The women are heading down river!

1997

Angela Peckenpaugh

It makes me sad that Angela Peckenpaugh gave so much of her life to writing and to art, and so little appears about her online.

I knew Angela a bit. I lived in an apartment building beside her apartment building on Bradford Avenue in Milwaukee, from 1982-85.

She was a familiar figure in Milwaukee literary circles. She was attractive, and fun-loving, and she had an interesting eye for beauty,

When I knew her she was exploiting the new color Xerox technologies, creating "still-lives" on the photocopier glass using feathers, ribbons, berries, skeleton keys, and other things she found in antique shops.

She was smart, and I wanted her to like me, or to see that I was worth knowing.

But we never quite became friends. I remember one night we played pool in a bar, and she spread herself across the billiard table to make a corner shot, aware of the effect she was having on others.

I searched the Internet for a picture of her, and could find only one, a group shot of her with writer friends.

Here is the only poem of hers I could find online, from 1977,

<https://www.vqronline.org/letters-lee%E2%80%99s-army>

Forget 'Ars longa, vita brevis.' It's all gone in a puff of breath.

Hot Dog In A Landfill

It wasn't especially good to begin with,
an ordinary Oscar Meyer, past its expiration,
waxy to the touch and tossed in the trash
by the farmer's market. But then it merged
with all the garbage in the world, avalanched
by banana skins, crammed next to crushed bassinets
and strangled gutter pipe, it has ceased to oxidize,
it is mummified by putrefaction.

No one will ever recover the thing, beautiful
and burnished and as edible as it ever was,
deep down in the dark, no crowd at a ball game will
pass it hand to trembling hand, yet it waits
for us upright in the earth even to the end of time.

2012

"The Minstrel & The Ladie"

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.

Statement On The Use Of Nuclear Weapons

The greatest responsibility of any mayor
is to use the city's stockpile of nuclear weapons
responsibly and with a commitment to transparency.
Therefore, as your mayor I promise to abstain from
the use of weapons of mass destruction
in the city's arsenal without a clear consent
of the majority of City Council members.
It is my intention to adhere to a policy
by which I am never left alone with controls
to these weapons, especially on weekends
or after I have been drinking,
despite any feelings of fascination I may have
with their awesome power.

O Pioneers!

Friends, good news!

You have all been upgraded to first class.

A change is coming.

There is a movement building -

you can hear it -

behind closed doors,

and in the cellars of old circus saloons

There is a movement to overthrow a failing order.

Dear Pioneers ...

Look around you. Men and women are standing in rows,

Pioneer voices rise up like shoots of corn.

Let the rain come, they say ... let the sun shine.

Here is the wealth that is grown in the earth,

Here are our children reaching toward light.

Even the frogs in the mud by the river,

Cry out ONE WORD to the stupefied moon:

Join now, Pioneers, with the frogs down there in the slough,

With bulging gullets they are croaking out a name –

Let me hear you say it – Let me hear you cry that name --

KLECKO! KLECKO! KLECKO!

Bill Stafford

I met him when I was seventeen
on closed-circuit TV in college

He was a visiting writer
and somehow I got to ask him a question

Which was, Do you enjoy what you do?
And he brightened and said, Yes! I really do.

Then twenty years went by,
I was at a party, heading upstairs

and Bill passed me on the way down.
He stopped and pointed at me and smiled

And I think he almost remembered me.
I hear writers say "I don't read

Because I don't want to be influenced."
But you would be smart

To be influenced by this gentle,
thoughtful man.

Witnesses

Three women at Perkins sit in front of me,
a mother and her daughters. The youngest,
in glasses, wears fuchsia lipstick and matching
fuchsia suit, with four silver buttons
on each sleeve. The sister has a sleepy, dragged out beauty
and unbrushed hairdo. You can make out the lines
of her brown arms through the sleeves.

The mother sits with her black pocketbook in her lap,
the strap looped around one wrist.

They appear to have rules about conversation,
taking respectful turns.

Though their eyes light up, and slight smiles glide on their faces,
not one word is audible twelve feet away, and no one laughs
or touches. I wonder if they are discussing the people
they met at the doors they knocked,
which ones seemed interested in the message they carried,
and which did not extend the courtesy of respect.

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

Nighttime At The Christian Retreat

The men who have been praying all day
Lay down their souls like cufflinks to the Lord.
And in a while the snoring starts, first in one cot,
Then in another, and soon each man
Is making his offering of oxygen.
There are thirty men under this roof
And not one is a drinker any more but maybe
We were all dropped on our faces as babies
Or maybe we have a greater than average population
Of former boxers, noses broken by a left jab,
Gladiators laid out on the Coliseum floor
gasping through a spatter of blood.
And the sum is like a song played on a rank of snouts
Like a choir of hogs assembled in crates,
Grunting and rooting and squealing for God.
Where the intake is a truck wheezing up a steep hill
And low gear holds the runaway in check
For if they leave the road they have set out on
They will backslide and their exertions will have failed.
Up a hill, down a hill, the night is an oscilloscope
Of panting crescendos and snorting diminuendos
On a Wurlitzer organ pneumatically powered.
The roof heaves up, the roof subsides,
Like the ribs of a whale with thirty men inside
Detoured from their journey to Nineveh.
And the night is the irreplaceable pearl
That we beat the shrubs by our houses to find

That we turn out every cushion, flip over every rug,
That we pry up the hardwood of our hearts to locate
But it is not there until we surrender,
Like the flushed faces of boys on their pillows
From the exertion of long days of play,
Like the din of a great brass gong, hung from a rope,
Fashioned by the hammering
Of a thousand earnest craftsmen,
Or the groan of a lamasery, chanting like smoke
High up on a dream Himalaya.

2005

At Rising Sun Campground, Montana

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 PayDay bar left under your pillow
is enough to attract a nighttime visitor.

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 Rice-a-Roni,
a thread of ketchup, the lemony scent
of Liquid Joy.

It was too far to move the liquid to the dumpster
without spilling, so I walked thirty paces from our tent
and drizzled it onto a sandy anthill, closer
to another tent than to ours.
If a bear did approach us, drawn by the smell
of last night's dishes, it would venture into
that family's tent, not ours.

Let's say for the purpose of argument we woke to nylon
and canvass ripping down the middle,
the screams of campers bring dragged away,
and an ambulance parked on the stony path,
red lights spinning, a family of four mauled
like pigs in their sleeping blankets.
Why, we would pack in silence and putter away
to the next campground just down the road.

2013

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
with no effort spared
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.

Truck Stop

The older man in the leather vest
Walks with the gait of a gunfighter
Toward the men's room, a gallon bottle
Of pink windshield wash
In one hand and a bag full of cigarettes
And Hostess Snow-Balls in the other.
He is compact and erect, and his mustache
Is trim despite hours on the road.
His white-haired woman, taking smaller steps,
Follows close behind, eyebrows penciled
in an 'I will follow you anywhere' arc,
Her frame a little dumpy from the miles
She has kept his company, but you can see
There was a time when she was wonderful.
Is he a good man? I can't tell. But I admire
The seriousness he girds himself in.
Like the last sworn knight in a useless world
Ambling past the Sega Strike Fighter
And the 'For Your Safety' condom dispensary,
Past the claw-fetching crane game and the
Lip-biting girl eying the Tickle Me Elmo
embedded in the heap.

The Buick Century

I was 16, lying that I was 18 to be
with a college girl. Nancy believed me,
I guess, and we climbed into the back
of my stepdad's car, fogging
up the windows, kissing and slurping,
when she slipped her tiny hand under my shirt,
and I recoiled as if a shotgun had fired.
After all that longing to be touched
To discover how ticklish you are!

1984

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

Prospect Park

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

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

2006

Riddle

"Everything happens for a reason," the man said.

Another man steps from a crowd and stabs him in the chest.

"Why did you do that?" the stabbed man asks.

"No reason."

Death of a Zealot, 163 BC

Eleazar Avaran was a son of Judas Maccabeus.

As depicted in 1 Maccabees 6 32-33,

He was killed at the Battle of Beth-zachariah.

Amid the clang of battle, Avaran identified the war elephant
of Seleucid King Antiochus V.

Bravely, he attacked the great creature and thrust a spear into
its belly.

The wounded elephant then collapsed upon Eleazar,
crushing him under its body.

Eleazar's body is discovered only later, sunken in the excrement
of the dying elephant.

Despite this heroism, the Jews still lost the battle.

2018

The Death of Aeschylus

Zeus is angry at the tragedian's nerve.

He appears as a crocodile to promise Aeschylus

That he will die soon, killed by a falling object.

Aeschylus ponders the sword of Damocles,

Falling chandeliers, balconies he is standing under collapsing.

He devises a way to mock the curse –

he lives the rest of his life out of doors,

where nothing can fall, enjoying fresh air

and praising nature's beauty.

One day he spots a soaring shadow high above him.

An eagle, inhabited by the god of lightning,

And in its talons is a hardshell tortoise

And in its crosshairs is the playwright's bald head,

a rock upon which to CRACK his dinner open

And enjoy the wet meat inside.

Signs

Every hundred yards in the Wisconsin woods

there are signs posted saying

No Hunting and No Trespassing.

People leave their cabins when the weather gets cold,

they don't want to return to a shot-through window

or knocked over pumphouse.

A good sign, suggesting violators will be prosecuted

seems to keep most people away, except for

those hunters who need everything spelled out.

You can tell a salesman made his rounds some time ago

because the dayglo veneer has peeled away from every sign

leaving three dry leaves of plywood sheeting.

So that every hundred yards is a tree

with a perfectly blank sign on it.

The gray of the bark crisscrosses the knots

and whorls of the plywood,

gray from the rain and north woods wind,

an advertisement to wilderness,

a message the animals read as well as you,

saying this is this and here is here

and deeper into the pines there is more.

1988

Columbus Circle

It is two in the morning, and the noise of air hammers and chainsaws from a night construction crew pries me out of bed. The view from my window at the Ritz doesn't include Lincoln Center, kitty corner, though the hotel celebrates its tradition of putting up musicians and singers and actors overnight. What I do see is a triangular patch of grass, and a statute of Dante, his laurels of bronze blending with the dead leaves of November. Dante gazes out on 63rd Street and Broadway, without much sense of humor, like a guy who knows his way around infernos. Besides the immortal poet is a bus stand advertising Eternity by Calvin Klein. It is late, and the traffic has begun to die down. Down the sidewalk comes a man who is drunk. Each step is an essay and not all are successful. He is like a mime climbing an imaginary rope, a phantom walking through new falling snow, that then melts in the shoulders of statues of poets, and I, too excited to sleep in my hotel bed, know exactly how he feels.

1987

Miracle Ear

In 2003, I began a 7-year period in which I attended an Evangelical church. It began with me worrying about my two kids, a son who struggled with deep depression, and a daughter who suffered from powerful anxiety issues.

I was afraid one or both of them would commit suicide. One did. My Christian phase was me trying to invoke magic to keep them alive. I didn't know what else to do. But there's more to it than that -- I experienced a kind of miracle that completely confused me. Still does.

My son Jon was 14, and he liked hanging around with two kids on our block. Their father was a minister, and given to subtle acts of evangelism. I tolerated that, but only just barely.

One day this minister, Ned, knocked on the door.

"Every spring our church has a men's retreat up north. I was thinking Jon would like to tag along. How would you feel about that?"

I said I was happy that Jon had friends, so yes, I approved. I did not imagine they would make him pray and stuff. Just basketball.

"How about you, Mike? Would you like to come, too? Keep track of Jon. Check us out?"

I said I would consider it. My consideration was basically, Where's the harm? It might be very interesting. I could write about it. Crazy Zealots Camp Out By A Lake. I called Ned back an hour later.

"Yeah," I said. "I'm in."

Rather than describe the whole weekend, I will give you one bit of background, and then the weird story.

The background is, I was losing my hearing in my left ear. It started as ordinary tinnitus, like the noise old TVs made after they stopped broadcasting for the night -- a thin flatline hum. You probably have the same thing. You live with it.

But my tinnitus started to morph. Over the course of a year it went from a think flatline to something much lower, growlier,

and pumping into a strange rhythm. I have described it as the sound of an engine room in a ship. It was very distracting. I had had to reconcile myself to this being the way things would be. I was 52, getting on.

That's the background. Here's what happened.

The retreat was mostly sports and "fellowship," which was made up of prayer, sermons, sharing, testifying.

I thought, Well, this is great. These guys have mostly been through the wringer -- alcohol, drugs, sex stuff -- and have found stability through religion.

They didn't seem like the sharpest pencils in the drawer. But that's OK. On average we're all average.

So I was inching toward sympathetic approval of the men.

Then they had something called an altar call.

The evening worship -- I had trouble with that word, still do -- was led by two Evangelical guys from Poland. They were extremely unironic. In their villages in the remote hill country in Poland's southwest, nearly everyone was an alcoholic and/or a whore. According to their slideshow, they turned it all around.

The way they said Jesus seemed to take four syllables.

Anyway, their English was bad, but they seemed grave and sincere.

With them standing in the front of the room -- a camp cafeteria -- men started forming a line to go up to the "altar" -- a card table with a cloth on it. When their turn came, each man knelt down, and a team of friends surrounded him, laid hands on his head, shoulders, heart, arms, and they all started muttering prayers for him.

I was the only guy standing in the back of the room. I thought about it a minute. Wouldn't I be a great dad if I got in line, too, and let them do their thing on me?

So I did.

I arrived at the front of the line. One of the Polish guys asked me: "How may we pray for you, brother?"

I looked around, nervous but determined to do this. "My son suffers from depression. He's here tonight. My daughter suffers, too. I'm not a member of this group, but maybe you could pray for them."

One of the deacons, suspecting something was fishy about me, asked this: "Mike, have you accepted Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and savior?"

I sighed. I know he meant well, but I hated him for asking it that cardboard way. I mumbled in reply: "Probably not to your satisfaction."

Then the crew descended on me. I felt them on my shoulders, on my head, on my upper arms. One man took my hand in his. It was extremely sincere.

I kept my eyes closed and listened to all the simultaneous prayers. Things like, "Heavenly father, watch over Michael and his son and daughter. Strengthen him to do the work he needs to do every day. Give him courage and clarity to be a good man, a good husband, a good father. Let him never doubt your love. Let your love for him be a firm foundation on which to build a life. Keep him healthy, and confident, and blah blah blah ..."

I myself did not pray. But I was truly touched by their humble intonings. I knew what I would do -- I would write about this experience later emphasizing these down-to-earth qualities. "I learned something today."

When the praying ended I felt I needed to respond in some way. I began reaching for everyone's hands, like a politician, thanking them. "Thank you. Thanks so much. Thank you. Thank you. You were all great."

They seemed perplexed by my handshaking, like I was trying to tip them. I was -- inauthentic.

Suddenly, I needed to get out of there. I worried that Jon had been watching from behind a pillar, and was either embarrassed by my being a jerk, or worse, shocked that I was falling for it.

So I bolted. I walked in long strides up the hill to the bunkhouse where my stuff was. At the door, I stopped in my tracks. The sun

was setting over the lake, and a few loons could be heard paddling in the darkening reeds.

Did you hear what I just said? "Could be heard." I actually did hear loons. How could I hear loons paddling with my bum ear?

I whirled around, and heard the whoosh inside my ear. I put my hand to my ear and tugged on it. I took turns listening from each ear.

And this was the deal. I could hear again, as well as I ever could, both sides. This was no bullshit.

A terrible time awaited me. I had to figure out what happened, whether my healing was imagined, whether I had only convinced myself I was deaf in that ear, whether some trick had been played on me. Or whether I was just, you know, healed.

And remember: I had told nobody about my bad ear. No one knew about it.

It was so weird.

The next seven years I struggled with this mystery. What happened? Why did it happen? What was the right response to it? What were the limits to that response?

If I were to actually pray, I'll tell you this much, it wouldn't be to hear loons paddling in a pond. It would be to save my daughter's life, which did not happen.

But that's God for you.

I have a lot to say about these years. One metaphor I keep falling back on is alien abduction. I didn't want this to happen to me. I didn't agree with what the fundamentalist people were saying. I hated the politics, the racism, their screwed-up take on women. Not everyone was super-terrible. One or two were enlightened. Most were somewhere in the middle, thinking they were doing the right thing while doing all the wrong things.

But the love and affection, their hands on me, the prayers they prayed for me -- that was real. Bummer!

I thought it was a cruel trick being played on me -- that I had to do this for the good of my kids. When one of my kids committed suicide anyway, the men all dried up and withdrew from me.

I think it fucked them up as much as it did me. How could somebody do such a thing -- take the greatest gift of all gifts, and throw it away? That's how they thought.

But this was how it began -- with the cries of loons on a lake not far from St. Cloud. It took about a year for my ear to go back the way it was.

2018

Extracted Confession

Yes, I am the snake that swallowed
The Indonesian woman who was tending her vegetables,
But I have a point of view.
First, I am a snake, and this is what I do.
You don't make a fuss when I swallow
A chicken, or a dog,
At least, nothing like this.
I am just doing my job.
I was hungry -- doesn't that count
For anything in this world?
If you were hungry you would start a war.
This was my larder before any of you
set up your huts.
All I did was inconvenience one small woman,
Who is in heaven now, that's where I send out
All my meals.

June 2018

Baboon Bride

The summer I turned 16 was 1967, the summer of Sgt. Pepper, the summer of love.

I was lucky to be offered a job as guide at a roadside zoo called Jungle Larry's Safari Island. I had to say I was 18 to get hired.

Safari Island was a part of Cedar Point, a big amusement park along Lake Erie near Toledo.

It was the greatest job a 16-year-old boy could want, cuz I was surrounded night and day by 18-year old girls.

They were so tan and beautiful. Some spent so much time in the sun, the hairs on their arms turned blonde. My challenge was to fool them into accepting that I was 18, and in college. I had to act sophisticated, like an 18-year-old boy would.

It was a summer of lies. I wore jungle khakis and an Australian cowboy hat. They gave me a nickname, Bwana Mike. I lived in a dorm with all those girls. I calculate I did not tell the truth for 108 consecutive days.

Jungle Larry was a real person, who went to Africa and supposedly caught animals on safari. I think he just bought them from brokers. He was a regular on Cleveland after-school kids shows, showing off his animals – chimpanzees, tiger cubs. He was 6 foot 7, with a Texas accent.

He told lame jokes. "If I knew you were coming, I'd a baked a snake," he said 14 thousand and 12 times.

All day long, as they people pushed through the pathways, loudspeakers played the theme from the movie "Born Free" over and over morning to night. BORN FREE.

In my mind I always whispered "and now they're in cages."

As we went along, I learned Larry was Christian Scientist, and did not like to call veterinarians in when animals got sick.

I started as a groundskeeper, sweeping trails and picking up trash, but I was soon promoted to a guide-slash-housekeeper for certain animals.

Since I was just a kid, I took care of mostly mid-size, lower-cost animals – monkeys, tapirs, African porcupines, flamingos, parrots.

But something happened on Memorial Day weekend, when we opened to the public, that changed that.

Just before the weekend, Larry bought a pair of wild olive baboons from Sudan to Safari Island -- a male named Mombasa and a female named Loma. And I was assigned caretaking duties.

Olive baboons have longer canine fangs than lions, and a reputation for rapaciousness.

In the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1932, a busload of Italian soldiers was attacked by a tribe of baboons, who tore the truck to bits and killed or carried off scores of soldiers.

Baboons are not to be trifled with.

They also have vivid naked radiant red asses that few people want to look directly at.

Both creatures were incredibly strong and insane-looking. And Loma was in estrus. Early Saturday we got word that a group of Seventh Day Adventists was aghast because 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 freaked. We shut down that part of the island. We placed 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 out 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 my hand. I think she was looking for the perfect place to sink her teeth.

But that's not what she was doing. She was studying the pores of the skin on the back of my hand, and then plucking -- 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 saw, for the first time, how very intelligent and beautiful she was. And she looked back at me just as fervently.

She was grooming me because she needed someone to groom, and I was all she had. In the days and weeks left to us, we communicated entirely by touch and by examination.

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 quit 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. One of the guys greeted me at the gate. "That baboon escaped," he said. "She climbed up a tree."

People gathered under a sycamore tree. I saw her in the top leafy branches staring out over Lake Erie. I could see from her expression she was only just now realizing how far she was from home. There was no easy escape route for her to take.

I called to her. Loma ... Loma ... She spotted me ... she hesitated a moment, then began scooting down from her high perch, like a polejacker working for the phone company.

I was glad she was safe. I was glad even though the part she presented to my view was her vivid red radiant naked ass, which I had very ambivalent feelings about.

She backed down the lower branches of the sycamore and climbed into my arms, wrapping her arms around me.

It was the only time I ever held her.

Four days later I was scheduled to leave the zoo, to start college. I couldn't say goodbye to Loma – I was only 16, remember, not a settled 18-year old. I lied to her, too.

So I slunk away, and drove across Ohio to my fall semester. And I put her out of my mind, and lived my life.

Twelve years pass. I was visiting Ohio with my wife. I wanted to show her the zoo where I worked. I was impressed that the animal areas were more natural now, more ... hospitable.

We came to the primates area. She was visible behind see-through nylon cables now, not bars. There were eight baboons in with her – all babies and adult females.

Loma was white in the face now, but she sat like a queen on a log of green concrete, a darling great grandchild, or a great-great, clasped in her golden arms.

Loma did not blink ... but she fixed her gaze on me. Life had moved on but look ... look at her, behold her, she had survived and done well. She had made a successful career for herself in the jungles of Ohio. Against all probability.

That's how I remember my girl. She was a queen of that jungle. That was my snapshot from our summer romance, and the beautiful creature who MADE A MAN OF ME. 2004

The Trip to Alaska

Fleeing from the death and failure of my L.A. commune, I sought refuge in St. Paul with my second family, the Jones. Whenever I was quaking with doubt, I turned to them, and they made space for me in their crowded house. I think they thought of me as a kind of artist, a poet in the making.

Carol Ann liked talking up local poet John Berryman -- whom I knew nothing about, but made a note to read. I responded with my stories about James Wright, also of Minneapolis, also a famous alcoholic poet, and who hailed from the Jones' home zone of the Ohio River near West Virginia.

I loved sitting at supper with their family -- even as I gave my own family back in Ohio the shaft. I found out later Carol Ann was in touch with my mom, and let her know I was in good hands, and eventually I would work out this walkabout in the world.

But this stability would not last. Clair's brother Evan, a year my junior, who had been raised on loudspeaker from J.R.R. Tolkien, had a magnificent dream. It involved the creation of a team of hobbits and elves, composed of friends from his boyhood back in Athens, Ohio, and taping an epic trip from Minnesota to Alaska in his dad's International Travelall, which already sported almost 300,000 miles.

At the last moment, he made room in the Travelall for me. I think this conformed to Clair's wishes that someone take me away from her to some other place, and maybe, me being the senior member of the troupe -- none of the others were 18, as I was -- I would keep an eye out for the others. This was a curious judgment on their part, as I had only thirty dollars in my pocket, one set of smelly clothes, and a spiral notebook to jot notes in.

Evan was the common connection for the boys in this group, beloved for the many adventures he had had with the others on back in Ohio, including goat hunting in the hills up above the Hocking River. Evan was beloved precisely because, of all the boys, he retained a boy's heart. He was almost cartoonishly determined to experience wondrous adventures, to extract

riches from life experience, to obtain wisdom from the wilderness.

We did not quite see that, just under the Tom Sawyer affect, Evan was emerging as a furious eccentric -- lovable as the day is long, but rigidly fixed on his own ideas about the trip we were embarked on. It required that we learn the same wisdom as he learned. And he quizzes us on this frequently, while he drove the Travelall, to make sure we were reading from the same mystical page. The task before us was to uncover our true Bodhisattva natures through yoga, reading and LSD. None of us got to vote on this agenda. Evan dictated it to us.

The trip was a crawl. There were no Interstates at that time. We drove into the wind every mile of the way. It took us two days just to get to the Canadian border. The Travelall was getting about 11 mph -- bad even for that gas-gulping era.

We made it to Winnipeg, where we scored drugs in a park by the university, then hung a left, out onto the Canadian prairie. Along the way we picked up an American draft resister named Mike, who told us tales about how Canada had accepted him, and how he was thriving at Simon Fraser University in Barnaby, which sounded like a training academy for Aquarian revolutionaries. We all accepted Mike. He fleshed out the group politically. We were a merry band and now we were a relevant one as well.

Personally, I had contemplated leaving the U.S., in the event I got drafted. I knew I was exposed to the draft, having dropped out of Wooster and changed my status to 1-A. I contemplated claiming Conscientious Objector status, too -- but I never did. I figured, How could I know I would do if Ho Chi Minh was raping my mother? You can't know these things until they arise -- unless you are a Seventh-Day Adventist or Quaker, which I wasn't. I was on my own. When the actual situation presents itself, that's when character asserts itself. I just might try and make Ho Chi Minh stop -- which was violence, which would exclude me from CO status. I mean, he was raping my mother.

We took acid in a Buffalo Pound Provincial Park, in Alberta. Locusts in the tall grass rustled and raised a hullabaloo. We did

all the usual acid stuff, staring at each other and telling what we saw, getting distracted by our hands and wondering which of us we were. We stood on a place where the buffalo roamed in fantastic numbers for thousands of years, now reduced to maybe fifty head. The handful of bison stood on the ridgetop looking down on us, noble and inscrutable. It seemed like a holy place. We tripped our brains off.

At one point, at our campsite, however, I lazily tossed a stick of firewood at a fat squirrel and -- to my horror -- hit it and killed it. It shuddered a moment and then just pitched forward, blood exiting by its teeth.

I was bereft at what I had done -- me contemplating pacifism just hours before! -- but we still roasted and ate it. No salt, no ketchup, just the burnt flesh of a fellow being. One plump rodent split six ways.

But the band of hobbits was getting bored going to Alaska. It took us seven days just to get to Alberta in the Travelall, and all we had achieved so far was getting high periodically and burning a lot of gas. None of us brought cold weather attire. According to the map and the truck's speedometer, Alaska was still about 14,000 miles away. And I was getting old.

The group mutinied. We held a meeting with our leader Evan and announced that Alaska was too far, and didn't the Southwest sound better, with the mesas and horned toads and whatnot. None of us wanted to show up in the Klondike on the first day of winter, wearing only bluejeans and tie-dyed T-shirts. So we turned south, with the intention of achieving satori in Arizona or Utah instead.

Alaska would always be a myth for us. The Shangri-La we opted not to visit.

Now we had the wind at our back. We crossed near Anacortes and camped at a state seashore. We were tired of eating Rice A Roni and thought we would try our hands at seafood.

The beaches were littered with oyster shells, so we dug around in the water and pulled out a dozen of them. Paul managed to snag a red snapper with a line. And Doug plucked several banana slugs from the plants growing alongside us, comparing

them to shelled escargots. I was the chef, and I boiled some butter water and began to cook a pot of beggar's bouillabaisse. It smelled good, except that when we dropped the slugs in the stew, and they opened their mouths in a silent scream, and extruded some weird goo out of their underpads.

"I'm not eating that," said Paul. Everyone wrinkled their noses.

"Maybe if we added some Rice A Roni it would absorb some of that gray slime."

That was when the game warden arrived and informed us our soup was a felony. Sure enough, he pointed out a sign:

FEDERALLY PROTECTED OYSTER BED. Violators Will Be Prosecuted To The Full Extent Of The Law.

So much for supper.

Our trip continued southward, but I was planning to exit the group. When we got just below the Bay Area, I had my brothers of the Shire drop me off in a town called Cupertino, where a woman lived who wasn't my aunt, but was my stepfather's stepmother's sister, lived. Her name was Elizabeth Esterley.

I had never met her, but I felt impelled to make her acquaintance, which I will explain in the next chapter.

Spoiler: It did not go well.

Mad

Ginsberg was right, the best minds were destroyed
by madness, assassinated by madness, but he missed
the obvious, that all are being destroyed, best and not best.
We have been made mad by America, made mad by ourselves.
I am mad. My wife is mad. My children are perfectly mad,
The ones still alive that have not been killed by madness.
Because we are mad there will be no grandchildren.
Too much madness is dragging us down.
Suicide, addiction, compulsion, violence, anger, retreat
All take us when we have nowhere else to look.
We hide it, and we smile, and maybe we seek counseling
Or chant to the sunrise with closed eyes to get a handle
On what is happening but the root thing does not go away.
If you have written a poem you are mad, driven into
Your imagination because the world would not have you.
And nowadays all of us have written a poem of madness
Because the world is too impossible, Ginsberg was right.
The young are made mad by the absence of love,
The old are made mad because love comes up short.
We all have guns to stave off the madness, in our drawers,
In our car trunks, on our coffee tables and in our safe deposit
boxes.
We have all buried bodies by the light of the moon --
Our mothers and fathers, who helped make us mad.
People say, "You should seek help for that problem you have."
"You say, 'What can they try that has not already failed?'"
Give me some pills, assign me some reading, ask me

With that bemused expression on your face,
“Have you ever tried thinking of it this way?”
And then you say the dumbest thing I have ever heard.
The best minds of my generation have been salted away,
Now we are working on the second-best tier,
Mad at the system, mad at the expectations, mad
At the lies we are made to feature prominently in our speech.
Customer satisfaction and because we care
When no one is satisfied and nobody cares.
We join mad groups so we can feel mad together.
Mad at our desires that are never fulfilled.
Mad at our politics which could not be more mad.
Mad at one another though we yearn to be loved.
Mad at the world which seems ready to go,
To make more mad smoke and burn more mad dead,
Mad at the TV and mad at our cars, mad at the Internet,
Mad at the man next door and his mad little wife.
Ginsberg was right, we are mad at our lives, and this broken art
Is all we can show, these broken words that make us mad,
And wish for better for our children’s children,
If there are some, if they are not already made mad.

Asteroid Ted Nugent

1

Suicide is still illegal in several states.

Life insurance companies will deny your claim.

Then there is the problem encountered in murder mysteries,

What to do with the body.

2

If you have loved ones you do not want to leave a mess.

You don't want them to open the door and see you.

There must be a way.

3

You could step off the curb and dive under a bus,

But that would be so mean to the driver,

To his wife and child.

They will never get over it.

4

There is the possibility of well-meaning intervention.

A cop with a bullhorn might talk you out of it.

Or you attack a squad car like you are on angel dust

and instead of shooting you down

the cop takes you home for meatloaf and pie.

Fat lot of good that did you.

5

The best way might be to play golf in an electrical storm.

Teeing off on the eleventh hole
and lightning taps you on the shoulder.
Your friends would say, you loved that game.

6

You could change your mind about all this
and a suicide bomber steps into the store.

7

You t-bone a car in an intersection, and out steps Death,
all bloody in his black hoodie,
a 48-oz Big Gulp in one hand.
He expires.
What happens then?
Your predicament deepens.

8

You pay a killer to take you out, without saying where or when.
Just make it look like an accident, you say.
Years pass, and you see his name in the obits
And write a check to the charity he loved.

9

Remembering you are allergic to bee stings,
you wade into a honeysuckle bush,
But the bees that swarmed there last summer are gone,
killed off by neonicotinoids.

10

You dream every night about relief.

A roc from the Arabian Nights swoops you up in its talons
and carries you off to its nest beyond mountains.

12

In your misery you shake your fist at God
and lift a revolver to your temple.

A band of winged babies appear and assume you
bodily into heaven.

You demand an explanation.

A baby explains, they are running a promotion today,
And you drew the lucky number.

13

You think this might be the day, and high in the sky
you see a bright light bearing down on the earth.
It is an asteroid named Ted Nugent by whimsical astronomers.
Ted has been crossing the galaxy for millions of years
with your name etched on its face.

Its sole purpose is to find you and put you out of your pain.
But it won't stop with you.

Oceans will rise, the earth's crust will cave in,
everyone will perish, humans and beasts.

The world will be extinguished
And terrified crowds turn to you and ask,

What did you DO?

Arrow Wound in Crowded Theater

The arrow lodged above my right scapula.
The head was stuck between two ribs.
I felt around for the shaft with both hands
but couldn't quite get hold of it.
I wondered if I should head for the rest room
to get a handle on the thing
but we were seated in the middle of a long row.
People were laughing at a funny scene
and though inhalation was painful
I bit my lip and watched the show.
I didn't want to make a fuss.

2001

Spring

The unemployed get to sleep in,
It's the only benefit they are entitled to.
The motorists on Ayd Mill Road
Make faces as they hit the potholes.
The first thunderstorm collides with the sunrise.
The sky is red with melodrama.
Wipers thud, a rainbow appears
In the sky to the west. Everyone's grip
On their steering wheel
Tightens, we can't be late to work.

2008

Columbus Circle

It is two in the morning, and the noise of air hammers and chainsaws

from a night construction crew pries me out of bed.

The view from my window at the Ritz doesn't include Lincoln Center,

kitty corner, though the hotel celebrates its tradition of putting up musicians and singers and actors overnight.

What I do see is a triangular patch of grass, and a statute of Dante,

his laurels of bronze blending with the dead leaves of November.

Dante gazes out on 63rd Street and Broadway,

without much sense of humor, like a guy who knows his way around infernos.

Besides the immortal poet is a bus stand advertising Eternity by Calvin Klein.

It is late, and the traffic has begun to die down. Down the sidewalk

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

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.

2009

Advice for the Bitter Day

Thoughts are like ` nails.

They have a point, they have a heel,
you can drive them deep into muscle,
then extract them with a claw.

If you insist.

We trust our instincts.

But our instincts are the reason we suffer.

We say, "Obviously, this,"
but it is far from obvious,
in fact it is wrong
the way chomping on a fishhook
is wrong.

You need to find a new way to live,
in which you take it easy on yourself.

You are the only you you have.

Conserve, preserve, pull back on the reins.
Somewhere you got the idea that
hurting yourself was your job,
and that was bad,
but then you became a workaholic about it.
Stop.

God gave you two brains,
and you never use one of them.

Unwrap it now and set it in its place,
and take it for a spin.

Instead of empty space
put a bird there and set it chirping.
Annoying little bird.
And let it chirp until you wish it would shut up
while it drowns out your stupidity.

Someone got what they wanted
so what makes you restless?
Do you want to spend the rest of your life
like a knucklehead, never getting anything?

Stand up.
Get out of the street.
Start walking,
and see where that gets you.

Bunny

Before dawn, walking by the tracks in the dark,
Lucy and I come upon a young bunny, just ahead.
The dog freezes, as that is her hunting style,
waiting until the other creature stirs,
at which point she will give chase.
Seconds pass, no one moves.
The bunny knows we are standing there,
and it is weighing its alternatives.
Two whole minutes pass, the three of us paralyzed.
Suddenly the bunny breaks –
not away from us, as all logic dictates it should do,
but directly at us,
like a bowling ball headed for the 5-10 split.
Lucy, who had been psyching herself up that whole long wait
for a moment of glory
following a thousand fruitless, pointless chases,
freaks out and dives between my boots
for safety, for protection from
this agile, quick-thinking thing,
which has long since caromed away from us,
skedaddling like a furry spirit
through a chink in the cyclone fence.

2015

New Tires

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

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

"I could have been killed."

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

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

"I will change."

The Effects of Splenda on Puerto Rican Ants

The apartment in Yocaibo was crawling with ants.

They ate everything, tortillas, jam, bacon grease, rice.

Before Rachel and I left for a four-day drive

we cleaned out the kitchen, emptied the cabinets,

got rid of every scrap of food.

When we returned, the counters and tables and floor

were speckled with dead ants,

on their backs, bellies up, tiny tildes scrunched into a ball,

beside an open jar of Splenda.

I'm not eating that stuff any more, said Rachel.

If ants, who are small, are fooled by the chemical,

What chance do any of us have?

The Little Airplane With Loads Of Spunk

In honor of the 2013 Disney picture

Little plane crashes on the runway.

The parked planes edge closer to examine the wreckage.

Damaged plane comes to, says,

Hello, my friends.

This mishap doesn't discourage me in the least.

I will fly back up there,

I will fly higher and higher,

looping the loops,

to show the strength of my resolve.

Say, how bad does it look back there?

Promise us, the old Cessna 310R says to the smoldering plane,

you'll wait here till the foam truck arrives

Lucy Poem

Failing again to make the New York Times Bestsellers List,
I walk my dog Lucy in the park.
She is the kind of dog who never strays far from me.
And when I speak to her
I tell her what an excellent dog she is,
and how glad I am that she stays off the streets.
When I lay my hands on her,
rubbing her soft ears and scratching her shaggy throat,
and I stroke her rounded, nearly hairless tummy,
she lets me know I am the most powerful
poet to ever draw breath.

2013

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 always expected to be older and wiser,

But obviously that can't be true.

I have myself looked into the eyes of the tall,

and found them to be intelligent and even empathic,

like sorrowful giants in certain fairy tales,

but never quite accepted by the populace,

which remembers negative headlines

and are always swoony for love, any love.

These treelike beings were once babes like us,

and babies they remain, but wailing from atop the clouds

at the impositions life heaps upon them

and them unable to find a place to hide.

2012

Little Jo

Is it ironic to be old
Yet short,
86 years but 4 foot 9?
Assembling breakfast
Jo pushes a stepladder
From cupboard
To cupboard.
My friends are dead and so's
Their kids. TV's no good
Since they took off Bonanza.
She stops me In the hall
One night. You know what
I'd like, she says, before the
Rent went up and moved
Her to a high-rise and put
Me in a crummy duplex,
Some times I'd like to go out
Like I used to, and just
Run around for a while.

1976

At Jungle Larry's

As a teenager I worked at a zoo in an amusement park near my Ohio home.

We had many animals, including three snakes, two reticulated pythons and a boa constrictor, averaging twenty feet in length.

They were very valuable because of their size, and this being in Ohio. But there was one problem.

Living in their glassed-in reptile hut, they had lost their zest for living.

They would not hunt, they would not crush, they just lay slumped on the rocks or dangled from a branch.

Once a month, to protect our investment, we needed to force-feed them piglets.

I remember their slack expressions as we unhooked their jaws and shoe-horned the plump bodies of the piglets into their mouths and slid them into the gullets.

The snakes wore an expression of How much must we endure?

They were sultans and kings by their place in the food chain, and now they were reduced to this, listless and depressed, like residents of assisted living.

But what I remember better was the squealing of the pigs as we advanced with the butcher's knife, and slit their pink throats.

They cost no more than three dollars apiece, but how these children valued their lives, how they wished to continue for just one more day!

Please, please, please, they seemed to be begging us -- Don't put us inside the snakes.

Applause for Crow

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

Great Clips Girl

Waiting area is not a social place --

people old and young flip through

old Glamours and Men's Healths,

waiting our turn for a haircut.

But this tiny girl, clinging to mother's finger,

is taking first steps on the linoleum floor.

Her father, of Indian descent, is rocking proudly

on his heels, his teeth so white,

and the child glances greedily at all the faces,

delighted to be at the bullseye of the room,

her starry eyes so undeniable,

we stare together with open mouths.

.

2011

My Hands

Our daughter came sheathed in blue jelly,
born in the bedroom of our apartment.
I caught her slipping into the world
with hands that suddenly knew what to do.
She was purple like my sick sister had been
and she shivered, and I lifted her, cradling her head,
with the speakers playing Gustav Holtz' "Saturn,"
while the midwife wrapped a receiving blanket around her
and the baby looked up at me calmly as if she had not just
completed
the most torturous journey a girl might take,
out of the cavern and into the light
and she spoke to me as if she recognized me ... ahh!

My son emerged quickly in an urban birthing center.
His neck got tangled in his mother's cord,
and he tumbled out lifeless, so shapeless.
These hands of mine could not hold him.
He was a jettisoned thing I was sure was dead,
and while the revival team worked him over
I backed into the hospital toilet and scraped at the cold wax
on my fingers, the vernix and I trembled.
I waited by the isolette with the light on your closed eyes
doing nothing useful but manning the post.
Fathers can't heal, fathers can't protect,
they can't do anything but pretend
when the dangers buzz around us like bees.

I stand there by you all day long. It would be weeks before
your limbs will work, and the day your hand
finally finds my finger and squeezes.

1994

The Dog in the Picture

He doesn't stare into the lens
He looks off into wherever
Yet he makes certain he's in each shot
He always stands out,
And everyone looks at him, not the camera.

Even when no one in the group
is on speaking terms with anyone else,
everyone talks to him,
even though or perhaps because
he will never answer

See, he shows his teeth,
His tongue hangs out to here, he knows
this picture is forever

2010

Barns

The wooden ones are coming down,
Whether they are the giant-breasted kind
Collapsing from the weight of too much hay
or the countless sheds and coops
that have started to lean in on themselves,
They have had it, it is finished.
The center beam of this great red beast
off the turnpike near Defiance
was good for a hundred years
And caused many to at least
Consider chewing Mail Pouch.
But a century of wind, all that lightning, that rain
And all that standing exposed
In the hot Ohio sun take their toll.
The people who live on the acreage
are cannibalizing the wood for fuel,
every day pulling a board away for burning.
All that will remain will be the limestone foundation
An open ruin with neither roof nor walls,
A reminder of the Germans and Swiss
Who put up these planks.
What will replace them
Are corrugated sheds, more efficient in every way,
With sliding doors and guttered tops,
No need to store hay any more, so one story
Is as good as two, and cheaper,
But the feeling's not the same,

Of these burly brothers who stood a hundred years,
Sad and red and full to bursting.

1988

My Mom

Mary Josephine Mulligan Finley Konik

Delivering her eulogy,
I wanted to make it sweet,
The memories of a boy's mom
Across a long lifetime.

I rode beside her four times
In our old blue Plymouth
To the drivers license testing place
Along the gorge in Berea, Ohio.

I wanted to marry my mother then
And buy her a new Chevrolet
In two colors, red and cream
And make her smile again.

She was the oldest of six Irish kids
Raised poor on a Michigan farm,
Determined to make it out of there,
Sprout wings and split that place.

But she married a selfish man
And gave birth to a sick little girl
Who lived to be sixteen and after
Having her teeth pulled out, died.

There was no escaping after that
And no discussing the loss with her.
We continued to have get-togethers
In the big back yard, and the pictures

Show her smiling, but not really.
Only me and my brothers knew
How broken she was inside,
And how angry she was at the switch.

She liked to chat but she never laughed.
She liked to read but she didn't learn.
She loved her sons like gilded icons
But one by one she drove them all away.

For thirty five years she had diabetes.
Injections, blurred vision, black feet.
A husband died, a flood swept through,
Her heart attacks took away her home.

She spent her last year in my house,
Not happily. But I got to better
Understand her attachment to the past,
And her odd way of loving us.

So when the end to her suffering came
In a hospital room in Kentucky
And the doctors tried to yank her back,

And they called out the all-clear

I see her 49 Plymouth again
Splintering the guardrail by the gorge
Pedal to the metal, car over the cliff
She is rolling her eyes one last time

From the electricity ripping through
Her shredded circuitry, oh what
Can you do, I hear her demanding,
That you have not already done?

Confessional Poem

In the 1970s I went to a lot of Twins games with Bob Canizzaro.

Bob always brought dope to everything so we'd drink beer
and puff away in the early innings.

Problem is, when you drink beer you eventually have to pee,
Which meant venturing from the serenity of my bleacher seat
To the cavernous restrooms above.

Baseball park bathrooms are basically troughs, and the men
Stand shoulder to shoulder and pee out their beer.

My problem was, I always get paranoid when I'm high,
And standing beside everyone with my junk out,
I froze up and was unable to pee. Nothing doing.

Nobody else at the trough cared, but I was certain what
Everyone was thinking – me, standing there, pointing my penis
At the stainless steel but not doing anything.

Did they think I was there for the view? Many times,
After the first 30 excruciating seconds of standing there,
I zipped up and exited, which must have confirmed

The suspicions I suspected. I would look down
On the green field, and the players in the outfield,
And reflect on my love of the game,
The only problem being, I still needed to pee.

1983

1956

We met only once, in the inflated rubber 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

1984

1952

I was in a tornado when I was almost 3, it was late afternoon in early June, in the greenhouse community of Columbia Station, Ohio.

I was in diapers and pins and upset because I was trained but my mother was in a hurry to dress me, and because our house was a duplex, we slimbed down the basement steps with the Heinzes next door.

Already branches were sailing through the air and the storm was whooshing all around us I stared defiantly at my mother for dressing me the way she did in front of the Heinzes, a mom in hairpins and her 8-year-old girl, hiding her face in her mom's hip.

While I kvetched about the diaper the wind whipped around us, knocking down our carport, and blowing my dad's fiberglass awning supplies, the ones he never made a dime off, away into the adjoining field.

Afterwards we tiptoed through the broken window frames. It was just starting to get dark. A deer, bewildered, bounded across the yard into the Scotch pines, and we spotted the unlikeliest thing, our '49 Plymouth upside down among the potato rows, a two-by-four piercing the passenger window, and fluttering just above that an emancipated kite spiraling wildly through the sky, its paper heart torn, its raggedy tail spinning it down to the ditch.

1982

Lucky Penny

I was walking by the tracks
on the first muddy day of spring
and saw a small circular object underfoot
I almost walked by, because often
these sightings are just bottlecaps or slugs
but this one caught my eye
like it might be a dime and I'll go down
for a dime because a dime is ten cents
but when I brushed off the grit
It was a plain old penny,
rusted with railroad gravel and salt
and some kind of violence caved in one side,
indented, like some mighty heel came
down on it, and I thought of my youth,
and how me and the boys placed pennies
on tracks a thousand miles from here
because the story went that a train
running over a penny would flatten it out
like copper foil, or alternately,
it would cause a mile-long train
to buckle and slide off its runway,
jackknifing, buckling, doubling up,
the crew members wide-eyed and screaming
as they slid down the embankment
all those chemical tanks cracking open like eggs
and spewing their pent-up poison
from Lorain to Toledo
and I know you're wondering what kind
of person would squander a penny
on such an inglorious outcome
and I say hey, admit it,
you would not look the other way.

She Takes Me Places

My belief as a young man without much in the bank
was that one could experience everything at home.

I quoted the Tao to defend this idea:

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

I counted this as a prescription for imagination.

Also addiction.

One need not climb an Alp to see the sun.

One need not skin a skunk to learn its secret.

I should have been a sloth hanging from a green bough,
my metabolism at one with the tree that I hung from.

But then she came and dragged me along.

She took me to the glaciers, we crossed the Great Lakes,
hiked into Death Valley and sauntered through Paris,
we climbed Atitlan and Maine's Mt. Kitahden,
we walked the knife's edge and we banged our canoe
as we hit the whitewater and stones.

That's how I learned the lesson of my life,
that when the body says I can't, I'm tired,
just leave me alone, fuck off, let me die here,
that is the moment you must switch off your will
and just follow.

2004

Limp

As children playing we learned that we could all
look crippled by dragging a foot.

So when we encountered a real cripple
with a serious injury or malformation,
we wondered why they kept dragging their feet
because we knew from experience it was an act of the will.
And why don't spastic people stop stretching their faces
and blinking all bug-eyed? Don't they see it makes the problem
worse?

Who needs those pop-bottle glasses and that awful, sticky
drooling --
when you know it's just a matter of inattention?

We made these recommendations in our heads as children
and maybe we thought we were being kind by doing a mitzvah,
we were poets advising the halt and the slow,
and calling it pity, an accomplishment of the heart.
Because this is what a poet does.

The pain of our own lives is fairly ordinary
But look what we can do with our minds, we borrow the
sorrows
of those who are really getting it, those who drag
their feet through life, wearing their frowns on our faces.
Because pain is simply a beard on a wire,
that fits over the ears, and the poets pass from table to table,
collecting tears in a hat.

Why Do Friends Love Us?

Why do our friends love us while we hate our guts?
How are they able to overlook the disturbances we fix on?
The patterns and indulgences, the sickening repetitions --
Is it because we spend all our time in here,
inside ourselves, with THAT -- and we exhaust ourselves
and the relationship is so brittle and tense.
We need to find a way back off from ourselves,
to take a break from our own personalities,
Rest until we learn how to be superficial
but loving with ourselves, the way our friends seem to be,
until we see ourselves as they see us,
from somewhat of a distance as forgivable things
that they are not all that bound up with.

2008

Pictures Lie

I sometimes wish I had brought a camera
Knowing I'll forget the shining moment
But pictures don't tell the truth
The slab I stood on was mightier than this
And it was suspended in air
That stone over yonder had inscriptions on it
The green in the trees somehow shouted out green
And things were not frozen like in the picture –
Everything was moving, the world was one giant blur
That could not fit between finger and thumb
There were no corners framing us
Or cropping out the bumper on the Ford
It does not catch the shutter of our blinking
Or the breath that accordioned inside us
Or my boyish heart, which plunked for you

1983

The Revolving Door At Higbees

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.

1984

Teaching Daniele to Drive

Because she was phobic, it took us six years.

She was afraid of oncoming cars,
so afraid she put her hands up when they passed.

I had to find places where she felt safe,
so I chose cemetery roads,
with their strange curves,
and the mourners making their way back to their cars,
white kleenex against black clothing.

We graduated to suburban lanes, practicing every Saturday,
month after month, until I let her drive us back into the city
the length of South Lyndale Avenue.

Three times she failed her exam,
and each time I encouraged her.
Everyone fails a couple of times, I said.

You'll get it.

But I was shaking the fourth time out,
exiting the car and fretting over how she would take
a fourth failure.

After the exam she sat in the car with the instructor
for what seemed like an hour.

When she stepped out, she walked across the blacktop
toward me, a grin slowly forming on her face,
and I broke down blubbing,
tears running into my mouth,
thinking, This might change everything.

The Cherry Tree by Du Fu's Cabin

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.

1969

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 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

2006

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.

1979

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.

2011

Too Many Orpheuses

The habitat is clogged with clichés.

You look offstage at the sea of berets.

Everyone scribbling, strumming their lyres,
too busy with their songs to listen to yours.

Song

If we just stand here
without all the distance
And not say a word
For five or six minutes

I want to remember you
without error or sin
As if we were young
and had nothing to forgive

This is what love does
It commands the words to stop
To remember who we are
It says to us, shut up

2014

Song 2

Could be I will win a prize
And suddenly feel legit
Could be the sun got in my eyes
But I'll get over it

It's possible for love to return
The old kiss, the same embrace
The loving people that we were
Will return to this place

The birds are singing in the tree
I know what they want to say
We have to learn to let it be
Come what may

2016

My Heaven

It lately has occurred to me
I don't enjoy anything as much
as watching the dogs chase tail.

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,
no arthritis, and turning over
things I found.

And if I could insist
I would see my other two dogs,
who left me long ago,
join with her, young
and impossible,
so violently kind
and so grateful to me,
not some old dude in a bathrobe.

And if you say,
that's a stupid heaven,
fine, it's just my heaven.
You figure out yours
on your own.

2004

'King of the St. Paul Poets,' Explained

People always ask about the title and crown.
I try to reassure them that I don't think I'm better than other poets,
that the title is hereditary, not earned in any way.
I point out that it was handed down to me
by my father Ralph Waldo Finley,
who composed rhyming verse from the daily racing charts.
It was given to him by his father,
my grandfather, William Butler Finley,
who popularized a form known as the loku,
consisting of eleven syllables and two exclamation points,
and before that given to my great grandfather Percy Bysshe
Finley --
'The Bisher,' everyone knew him as --
who received the title by legislation
for his stirring poem about the confluence
of 19th century agriculture and leisure, "The Rusted Plough."
And I say to those who are jealous of the title
that instead of begrudging me mine,
why don't they get off their asses and inherit one,
like I did.

1999

Unlovable Man

It was a wonder to him he wasn't loved more.
Even in the blush of his beauty,
buffed to a shine and fully operational,
the ladies found him perfectly resistible.
He did not grow in stature over time.
or take on the appearance of mastery in his years.
All his life he would stop to look at himself
in the mirror and ask
What did the world not see
that he could not see, either.

1999

The Creek Bed Glittered With Flecks Of Gold

We were high because we always were,
high up there in the San Pedro Forest --
but not so high we thought the gold was gold.
We knew that there were pyrites in the world,
and we didn't want to get taken in like fools.

Yet there it was, scores of flakes of purest gold
glinting up from the sandy bed.
Later, Jamie stumbled in from the path uphill.
"I'm not sure," he said, "but I think there's a bear nearby."
Everyone let that thought sink in.
Pocketfuls of gold weighing us down,
us too slowed to make our escape,
the rampaging animal hot behind,
all of us fallen, all of us bled to death,
just yards away from the red pickup.

"How do you know there's a bear?" Quittman asked.
"Because I saw the biggest pile of shit I ever saw,
just up the hill by that big Ponderosa.
And it had berries in it, and it was still soft and steamy!"
"I don't believe a bear left that," Quittman said.
"Oh, and you're some sort of wildlife biologist?"
Quittman threw a stone at the winking gold.
"Just, please, take my word for it."

1979

Why Seek You Him Here?

Why look for him in prayer?

God is not there

You can't place a local call

to the All-In-All

Not responding to anyone,

why, that's half the fun

He has gone into his father's house

He's got no time for the likes of us

Too busy creating fresh wounds

to manage old accounts

Best look for him in jail

picking his teeth with a nail

Better, look where no one looks

and not in books

The Lost Colony

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

After the first year we piled everything up on the beach
and waited for the ships, but the ships didn't come.

We had to eat our own food.

We didn't make a cent.

The next year was the same, and the year after that.

The piles got smaller, and after a time only the
young went on about sailboats and flags.

The torches we lit with the remaining oil
laughed through the night and went out.

We started to keep to ourselves in the fields.

The work week grew shorter.

We didn't talk over meals as much .

We stopped showing up
at the market, at supper

On the night of the last meeting we cast our final ballots.

Breaking camp, we buried the pitchforks and rifles.

We burned our houses and put out the fires.

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

Dividing into groups of two and three, we headed inland,

leaving not so much behind as a single naked
footprint in the sand.

Blackout

The city of London hid in its own darkness
knowing night was when the planes came,
and a single pinprick of light would give them away.
Fires were doused so no sparks flew out of chimneys.
Windows were painted or covered over with black cloth,
Shops installed airlock entries so no light escaped when
customers entered or left.
Traffic lights were blinkered so light only deflected down.
Policeman patrolled the streets, saying "Put out that light!"
The lamps were dimmed, the fuseboxes shut off,
people anxious for a cigarette put off the urge.
Coastal cities turned out their lights, so towns
would not give away ships in their harbors.
In Ipswich there was a panic because no one could figure out
how to switch off the illuminated clock.
The main problem was cars, which drove into pedestrians at
crosswalks,
or left their lights on and gave away everything.
It was not that the city was invisible to the squadrons,
or that radar or maps did not exist.
It was that, without identifying lights, bombardiers did not know
what was where, they had no point of reference.
The first few moments outside were completely bewildering.
After a time you learned to grope forward in the dark,
hands outstretched, for early warning that something is there.

Sworn

I declare that you loved me
though the rails clacked
and the TV raged
because I was no good in a way
you would want good done
nevertheless I was the one

Particularly, or perhaps
in the light of late afternoon
that rolled and stretched
in a davenport dream –
my hand on your hipbone
like a witness taking an oath

2014

Old Girlfriends

I'm not supposed to but I think of them.
Not the way they are now, wise and complicated,
but the daffy way it was joyful to please me
when we were young and things were possible.
What a blessing their kindness was,
the future stretching out like airplane glue.
Me and them alive in the big house together,
Grateful to be able to get at one another.
I want to pick each one up in turn and spin her
And look into her eyes and say thank you
for thinking I was someone to dally with,
that our hours were somehow well-spent.
This one thought she saw something in the man.
This one said, Well, he's not going to hurt me much, or
He's not the one but he'll do for now, moments
Of favor gleaming like a badge upon my heart.

1999

Other Women

How you must wonder
what the man is really like

The delight of him so human,
so stirring to the breast

He seems to have a sense
of their experience

To be near to such a one
so ripe with understanding

He is the one they didn't wait for
all those hurried years

He is the one who feels
the lining of their hearts

He is no great lover
but who cares about that

They hunger for instruction
And he has armloads written

They hope for the moment
when the iris flutters out

And the plumed figure struts
and the speckled flank may thrash

On the barbed hook
of an upraised eyebrow

Sleeping With Woodpecker

I stand over you with the morning light
streaming through the blinds.

You look so beautiful asleep in our bed,
covers tucked against your open beak,

tiny slit-eyes shutting out the world,
resting your head from a long day of banging.

Falling Out of a Moving Automobile

One day late summer, 1954, we were out on an errand, in the heart of Olmsted Falls, Ohio, my mother and us three kids. I remember staring up and out of the back window, behind the seat, up at the telephone poles looping overhead. I was about to slip into nap state.

But I didn't, because our mother took a fast turn and I rolled over toward the rear passenger door. The centrifugal force of my mom's hard left turn, combined with the weight of my small body smacking into the door handle, was enough to cause the door to open. And out of the car I tumbled.

We were going maybe 25 miles per hour.

I remember every microsecond of the spill that followed. I tumbled headlong, with my hands in front of me – kids become skilled at falling, over the years. I fell at such an angle, missing the rear wheel entirely, that I flew over the gravel alongside the road, and into the tall grass of the shoulder sloping away from us.

I remember hitting the grass, and feeling its softness in my hands, and against my face. I remember the sounds of cicadas in the grass. And still I rotated, somersault after somersault, like a slinky, down the grassy grade.

I struck no rocks, no beer bottles – which people just threw out their car windows in those days – no obstacles of any kind.

I was aware that this was happening only a block from St. Mary's of the Falls, the place I spent so many Sunday mornings at pewside, casting about for something interesting.

I found this tumult in the grass, right this moment, very interesting. I rolled about 50 feet, and came to a soft stop, still a couple of yards from the beautiful, rippling Cuyahoga, that pours over the ledge in that town in a seamless cascade, that reminded me of my mother's tortoise-shell comb.

My mother raced down the slope to engulf me. I will say for her, she took full responsibility for the event, castigating herself for several seconds before obtaining a promise from us kids that our dad need never know about this.

We piled back into the car and drove the four miles home. The sun was low in the afternoon sky, and the leaves on the poplar trees shimmered like dimes in the late light.

And I began having thoughts that I would never die and that there was no danger in the world. Those thoughts have persisted, wrongly, to this day.

Irradiated Love

How I enjoy seeing you
in your paper shoes and hat
and lilac scrubs,
Do with me what you will, Aurelia –
Enlighten me the way you do,
I want to shimmer and scramble your screen.
I love the merry expression I see in your eyes,
the jokes the two of us make
as you put me in the position,
then disappear behind the lead-lined door.

Talking Dog Poem

I asked my dog,
why must you wolf down your food?
Without looking back, he gulped,
"I'm late for a nap."

Proof of God

Is in the breath so simple.
Breathe in, breathe out,
Then tell where one begins
And the other ends.
Or tell me it was you
Who gave instructions to the lungs,
"I have inhaled enough, old friend,
Now it's time to let it go."
The truth is, it happens
And it happens again,
Over and over, every minute
We are alive, a moebius loop
Of oxygen and carbon
That is just exactly
What we require,
Not an advanced degree
in gas hydraulics, a bird
On a branch is as competent as that.
Mechanics call this device
A governor, and it governs us
Without our being aware,
And it is everywhere,
In every cell and every blink
And every balanced process
That there is.
And you can say
That's no old man with a beard

But I say well it's something
And it keeps us going day to day,
A will to order that provides us
Opportunities,
But you need not believe to draw air,
It is given, and there is no moment
When we are free from this
Casual miracle,
This tap on the shoulder
That says here, friend,
See what you can do.

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 his power.

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 given everything away,

and I don't take anything back."

Shame is for sissies and you

Are a killer

2000

Early Finley

My pajamas shoot down my legs and scamper to a corner.

The bathroom mirror yawns,

I look down its throat for eons.

My coffee cup breathes blue vapor.

The doughnut tightens round my finger.

1968

Trompe l'Oeil

The painter's wife turned her back on him
And went to sleep. He went to his studio and
Set up his easel and painted a picture of
Snow falling on a small Wisconsin town.
On one of the whited-out streets was a house
With green shutters and a streetlight shining on
An upstairs window. The man and woman inside
Had Undressed, a pair of shoes lay under the bed.
Before climbing in, the man bent over and
Brushed the dust from the soles of his feet.
I know, the stooped-over man was saying,
I will rise up early and paint a picture of snow
Falling outside our bedroom window.

1976

Sympathy for the Woodpecker

I too have been banging my head
like a jackhammer of bone
on the skin of a willow tree,
till thoughts rattle round
like unnumbered roulette balls searching
like Odysseus for home.
Where will this quest take me?
Will I settle for grubs that fall to earth
And wriggle in the leaves,
or will I spend my lifetime
skullstruck and stupid
compounding the error of my ways

2005

Awakening by a Statue of a Spanish American War General on a Cold December Morning

for Jim

It is dawn and I am coming to from last night's roar.

I am lying in some kind of chokeberry bush.

Gray everything – gray air, ground, me.

Across the street, I see steam chuffing from the Pillsbury A Mill.

My father, who had not other dreams, shoveled coal there for
forty one years.

I wonder what day it is, if I'm late for class again.

I'll tell you confidentially, this is getting old.

Phone lines, sheathed in ice, crackle overhead.

A quiet jet trail crawls across the sky.

I gaze at the frozen foam erect on the St. Anthony Spillway.

I suddenly realize I am frozen solid.

Take the Worst Thing

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

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

2010

Primates

Chimpanzees are actually no hairier than we are.

Their hair is just coarser.

What really sets us apart is our butts.

Where ours are meaty and horselike.

Theirs are like nonexistent.

Biologists suggest that because we were

the greatest runners in the kingdom,

we needed a counterweight to our upper bodies

when running down prey,

or hurling an atlatl the furthest possible distance.

That's what our butts do.

They are the source of our power and balance,

essential to survival and conquest,

and later, when we are at rest

something to express our place in the food chain,

like a boat pushing off,

showing our backs to the world.

2011

The Artist's Development

An examination of the creative process as consciousness grows in complexity.

Buzzy the Bear woke up up in the forest. The world was beautiful. The sun was shining. Buzzy loved to run and play. He also liked honey.

*

Buzzy the Bear woke up in the forest. "What a great day!" he said. I'm going to run and play all day! And find some honey to eat!"

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An examination of the creative process as consciousness grows in complexity.

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*

Buzzy the Bear woke up in the forest, and yawned the biggest yawn ever. He had dreamed of a big bowl of honey. "Honey is so wonderful," he thought to himself.

*

Buzzy the Bear woke up hungry and decided to go looking for honey. "I know," he said, "I'll get help from Blinky the Squirrel. Squirrels are so clever at finding things!"

*

Buzzy the Bear woke up Blinky the Squirrel. "Wake up sleepyhead! It's a beautiful day in the forest!"

*

Blinky opened his eyes to see a bear poking his head in the hollow of his tree. "Eeeeehh!" he screamed.

*

Blinkey the Bear had hibernated all winter long. He had lost weight, and needed nourishment. He staggered over to an adjacent tree, where a squirrel lived in a low hollow. Brutally, Buzzy swiped into the hollow and fetched out the body of the unconscious creature.

*

"I'm going to eat you!" the bear roared. "I'm going to eat you all up!"

To which the squirrel replied in a flat voice. "Do what you have to do," it said. "This is after all the way of nature."

*

The bear was starving. Without nourishment he would die. Casting aside his reservations he thrust his paw into the center of the hive. Immediately he was engulfed in angry Africanized bees, who knew just how to slide between his greasy black hairs, find the vulnerable skin, and push their pulsating abdomens downward with a hundred throbbing, frantic, life-ending injections of venom.

*

I know just what to do. I'll take what I want. I'll eat what I want. No one can harm me. I am the master of my fate. I'm a bear for fuck sake.

*

The other bears steered clear of him when they encountered one another in the forest. He was known to be a rogue, an outlaw. The males feared him for his violent disposition. The female bears regarded him with interest, because of his size, which was stupendous, but more for his sneering indifference. Something told them he had been terribly hurt, and the pain had caused this transformation that they could only regard as magnetic. This animal was a loner, his expression seemed to say. He will only lash out and hurt.

*

Buzzy the Bear woke up in the habitat that had been created for him. He did not know or understand his captors, who were like bears but like gods as well, purposeful but forever mysterious. Because of them, his anxieties were over. They brought him food, and swinging tires to strip with his powerful claws. Life lacked relationship, and meaning, and the cry he made in the back of his throat, all those years in the forest. He had gained a hundred pounds, and he knew this winter there would be no sleeping. Just please the crowd and eat the fruit they piled by his dish.

But at night, in the zoological gardens, when he dreamed, it was always the same dream -- of endless swarms of bees, of tearing, carnivorous teeth, and always the prospect of dripping honey and the pain he underwent to obtain it.

And as he sat on his pad by the cast iron latch, he looked back at the people who stared at him and chattered like forest creatures.

And the thought that he thought:

"How sweet is this beautiful world."

My Mother's Portrait

In 1962, our family was coming apart.

My sister had died from a trip to the dentist.

My father stood on the terrace, under the Chinese elm, and told me

he was moving to California.

My mother, who never went to college, besides waiting tables at Holiday Inn and Stouffer's -- selling Mutual of Omaha door to door in Elyria, Ohio. Many nights, even school nights, I would sit in the car while she tried unsuccessfully to scare people about their future. The leads were never any good.

We needed a hundred dollars a month to make rent, and some months she was a month late.

Meanwhile we boys ate, and ate, and outgrew our shoes.

My mom would come home from the restaurants after midnight,

drop her tips in a jar, smelling like french fries and comb the smoke

from her long, brown hair. And yet, it was this exact moment that she chose to hire a painter to paint her portrait.

It is a Scarlett O'Hara portrait, her standing against a field with her hands clasped before her.

She is beautiful in the picture because that's what she was.

She appeared to have great character because she did.

One snafu -- she felt the painter made her breasts a titch too big, and being self-conscious, she worried that every eye

would go to her bosom. This is a portrait painter's nightmare,
having to undo a part of the body, and replace it
with the same background as the rest of the picture.
If you walked up to the picture, you could see it.
So there was an element of shame even in this proud hour.
My friends said it was the kind of picture whose eyes
followed you across the room. I could not look at it
because I would drown in her beauty, and drown
in her pain. I was so afraid of her disapproval
and even of her love, that years later, after I moved
to Minnesota to escape from her eyes,
I could not bring myself to answer the phone,
because it might be her, and I was so high,
I could not bear to disappoint her.

2014

The living shake their fists at God

The dying, not so much.

To Sister Marian in Chardon

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

You Feel Guilty About Your Cancer

I found this in my notebook from 1998, the year my brain thrombosed.

You felt shame when you were diagnosed.
There must have been something you could have done
to keep this from happening to your family.
If you had eaten different, more vegetables and fewer orders
of fries, more green tea and less red wine,
if you had meditated, cultivating a more positive attitude.
If you had paid more attention to your body.
If you had been a better man and lived a more giving life.
Wait for a loved one to die steals your life and makes you
hate yourself for wishing it were over. You think of solutions
that might simplify things, reduce the number of months of
waiting,
but they are terrible, too. You wish you had saved more money
and could afford a maid to sweep under the bed or a personal
attendant
to swab you clean, so the people you love are not put through
that.

You wish you had not drawn attention to yourself
so the people you love could blossom in their own time,
because that is what you wished for them and they
are really all you have and because it's not right
that you should make them suffer.

1998

Taking the dog into bed

Forget the sandy paws from the walk by the river.

Forget the just washed sheets.

Let her up with you.

Let her lay her chin on your shoulder.

You stroke her in the dark.

You smell her beautiful smell.

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

She licks your fingers.

You close your eyes and sleep.

My boy Jon

My son is 30, and he has struggled with serious depression his whole life.

As a teenager he had suicidal impulses, which he pondered deeply,

picking out rooftops to fall from.

It was especially hard after his sister died, and he became everything to us,

Still hearing the voices, still feeling the urges.

But he promised he would not break our hearts that way,
not our only remaining child.

So he goes through the days still feeling the call, shaking it off,
putting up with his life

As an act of love to us, as a gift of suffering.

If he could endure his pain for me, I decided,

I can do the same for him.

Copyright Your Poems!

The great poets of history died in comfortable circumstances for a reason.

At the bottom of each poem they typed, or scrawled,

“Copyright 1817 by John Keats,” or

“Copyright 1879 by Emily Dickinson – all rights reserved.”

That simple copyright line made all the difference.

Imagine a would-be poetry thief coming across a work of yours,

With the intention of stealing it and cashing in on your intellectual property,

the fruit of your imagination.

They want what you rightly have – the fame, the riches, the reputation

For maintaining a poetic attitude – eloquent, grandiose, deserving of attention.

And it’s all so easy! The perfect crime!

Then they spot the copyright notice.

Curses, there’s a copyright notice, they say, wiping their face with one hand.

The “perfect crime” has been nipped in the bud.

The FBI would surely track them down, and Interpol,

Because the theft of genius knows no boundaries.

So much is at stake.

Perhaps a few thieves are clever enough to subtly rewrite your poem,

replacing your words with synonyms, using a thesaurus,

and thereby fool the powerful algorithms and bots

that scour the world wide web for items to plunder.

But think about it -- if they had that kind of talent,

To paraphrase your remarkable work,
why didn't they write their own poem in the first place?
How better to see your work appearing in anthologies and
major magazines,
As is your right, as earned by your talent.
Better for the royalty checks to stuff your mailbox.
Because if they don't go to you, they will go to Osborne D.
Littwack.
So take the time – protect your work, protect the financial
future
Of your little ones. And do it today.

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Every Song Is An Act Of Love

It begins with caresses -- solo notes are plucked,
a feeling forms, the plaintive first hints of melody.
And then a breath, and a repeat, like knocking twice
when the first knock goes unanswered.

Now I pledge my troth, committing at the bridge,
my hand at my heart drawing your heart to me.
Now I am dipping low, I am grasping for leverage,
I will pivot on a seventh and lift it up again, hard.

And there is the bridge, and there is the title
repeated again, this time louder than ever.
The string is pulled, the confetti explodes --
Surprise speckles every face!

2015

Talking Fly

A fly lands on my resting thigh and commences wringing
its hands over my skin.

I say, Fly, do I look like a steaming pile of crap to you?

Fly says, Well, I did land on you.

By the Mighty Oak Tree

I call to my young poodle Lucy, standing

By a thick oak tree in the park.

She ignores me. I frown, because it's important
that a dog to attend to its master's voice.

I walked around the stout oak to see her,
picking pink chunks of vomit from the ridged bark
with her teeth and gulping it down.

I picture a drunk leaning against the trunk in the dark
and losing a festive evening's ham sandwich.

"Goddamn it, Lucy!" I cry.

And I do not say the following but I think it:

"This is not what you are called to,
licking vomit off a tree trunk.

You were called to be a beacon to other dogs,
a bright light advertising obedience and grace."

But Lucy doesn't hear me.

She trots away from the offered leash,
and precedes me through the park,
pausing at the base of every oak she passes.

Being innocent of how the world works,
she is hoping that ham salad with pickles
grows from the ridges of every mighty tree.

Atheist Heaven

He is especially tender with these ones
because they lived their entire lives without comfort.
There were no opt-outs from reason.
They lived in the crush of what could be seen
and they never asked for favors
and they never lied to themselves
and they never were kissed
by the endless enveloping night.
They were saints of a sort,
of a bleary, chap-mouthed sort
and when it was over they lurched into dirt
and issued not a single complaint.
They say He loves them most of all and equips them
with the tools to live without Him,
the willingness to suffer being chief among them
and instead of one guardian angel they get two
because they will have more trouble
to get out of
and now they sit in this anteroom forever
elbow to elbow, legs crossed,
thumbing the pages of magazines.
They never know,
and nobody tells them
how loved they are,
or where.

Mystery Girl

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

2010

Compassion

I was watching an old movie from Japan
About a dinosaur bird on a destructive rampage
When the phone rang.
It was my friend Jeff, who had lost his family
In a highway accident a year before.
I paused my movie to talk to Jeff.
He said he was still struggling,
Unable to focus on his work,
That he missed his little son and two daughters,
And the talks he had with his wife Marianne,
After the kids had gone to bed
And I nodded and said the empathetic things
But all the while my finger was on the pause button,
Waiting to see what would happen to Tokyo.

2017

Supreme Being Speaks at AWP

Hello, good evening to you all, I believe you all know who I am,
and I just want to extend thanks to the poets who responded to
my summons,

and for staying after the regular meeting.

There's just a few things I wanted to discuss with you.

Things that have been on my mind for some time,
and I thought it would be advantageous to lay them out clearly
so there will be no misunderstandings in your minds.

First of all is a matter of protocol.

I ask that you don't high-five me when you see me.

It is a presumptuous thing for you to do

and it implies we are in complete agreement about the way my
universe works

Or that you are some kind of favored person

With an inside track to the way I think about things

and none of those things are true.

So if you see me -- out in nature, or appearing in the clouds, or
across a crowded room -- stifle.

Second, and this is related, more than one of you has publicly
thanked me

for the inspiration I've sent your way, or a muse or something.

I just want to say on the record right now that I have never sent
any of you

any inspiration or muses.

The truth is that I am very busy with a number of pressing
matters

and whatever you dream up to write down in your journals,
that's on you, it is not a product of me.

Hard to believe, I know, but in this case quite true.

There is an issue here that my lawyers describe as intellectual theft,

and I will just say I have my team looking into that,

and you should not be surprised if sometime in the future actions are undertaken against the more egregious offenders.

I have made a list of some of the more common offenses we've been noting,

and if you don't mind I'd like to read them off to you

so that there are no future misunderstandings.

I've broken my remarks down so that they address different groups of poets.

If you hear your group mentioned, it is my hope you will pay close attention

and alter your literary behavior accordingly.

First off, you nature poets ... It's great you like the birds and flowers. But what is there to say, really? They're great. Everyone knows that. And don't imagine you are doing them justice.

You wisdom poets ... When you make like you know all the answers, that's competition, and I think you know how I feel about that.

Alcoholic and high poets ... you think people can't tell you're writing smashed? You think points aren't deducted?

Surrealists and solipcists ... What are you talking about? I give you a beautiful, orderly universe and you gravitate towards talking toasters. Come on guys -- get real.

Contrarians and obscurantists ... Doesn't it trouble you, that audiences always look at you like confused dogs, titling their heads at your paradoxes? I'm not sure what to tell you, because you'll just do the exact opposite. Oh, wait, I've got it: much success to you!

You tenured poets living off grants and fellowships ... what can I tell you, except you'll make it up on the other end.

Finally, you poor pitiful poets ... you know who you are.
Someone died, or you broke up with your boyfriend. Suggestion:
get over it.

I know you suffer, I'm sorry things didn't work out. But why bum
everyone else out?

I want you all to consider that the whole world is depressed.
That's sort of a baseline. I know. What good will your poem of
misery do anyone?

Listen friends -- That's all I have for you. We're going to release
you back into your element now.

Do take the things I have said to you to heart.

Don't make me call you together again.

Because if I do, bet on this – I will write a poem like you have
never read, and you will wish it would end, but it won't.

Thanks ... I gotta catch a plane.

1989

Heartbreak

The Blind Glutton

The caterpillar had eaten all the leaves on the bough.

Oh!, cried the sparrow, you have killed the tree!

How am I supposed to know, the caterpillar cried,
can't you see I don't have eyes.

The Burning Cigarette

I have ambitious aspirations
the cigarette announced.

The toadstool said to him,
I don't think you've thought this through

The Fountain

Families come from all over
and spread their blankets on the grass

The fountain is predictable
every forty minutes it goes off
and sprays like a carousel
of rinestones

Mommy look, a little boy says,

I tasted it, it's salty –

and kind of greasy.

Mother kleenexes a smudge

from his cheek,

Don't you know it's

a fountain of tears?

The Cast-Iron Skillets

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

Twenty years later you run into him again.

He says, are you still holding those things?

Hey, you can set one of them down.

The Man With No Arms And No Legs

A man with no arms and no legs

is grinning ear to ear.

What have you got to be cheerful about

he is asked.

I like how the light is playing on my face

I have a feeling it's my lucky day

The Miracle

The man in bad straits had prayed for a miracle

and a jumbo jet landed on his house

The Man Made Out Of Glass Who Keeps Breaking

Every motion he makes

some new part breaks off

first a finger

then a hand

He wonders whose blood that is

forming on the edge
He keeps breaking and breaking
without losing mass
The spit bubbles
between his lips
Why doesn't someone say
stop stumbling about like a dope
All this pointless breathing
and acting surprised
He is an item of scientific interest
Making rainbows out of prisms
Don't love me he says
it's unsafe when I shatter

The Chord

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

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.

2010

'Your Dog Is Beautiful'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

You massage them for a moment, maybe removing some gook from an eye, because the dog knows you are OK and will grant you this access. A thumb gently rubbing inside the ear is usually

welcome. Scratch them just above the tail -- everyone likes that, even you.

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes. Very. Oh, yes!"

Victory Through Song

True story of Vasily Zaytsev, Red Army artilleryman who suffered battle fatigue in Afghanistan in the 1980s. The trauma of seeing his friends immolated caused him to sing thing he said, a little out of tune. Some comrades feared he would give away their position with his singing, and they took him out, shooting him as he slept. Not only did he not die, but he continued to sing as long as he lived.

From now on I will enter every room singing.
Just like in an American musical
Singing morning noon and night now
I will be singing to my cereal
I will sing to my dog who will tilt her head in confusion
But I will laugh and kiss her on her head
And everything will change now
You will smile when you see me
You will say there is a man who's not paying attention to reality
Because he always greets us singing
He is restoring the people he loves with color and laughter, they say.
And other people will start singing
They'll lock hands across the city
Traffic will come to a stop
As people roll down their windows and start singing
And money will stop being everything
One beautiful song after another
And children will thank their parents for every act of love
And wives and husbands will sing to one another
Singing Oh, oh, oh, we are singing
And the government will get suspicious
As the economy starts to tank
Because even the hedge managers are looking out their windows
And they sing Oh, oh, oh we can't help singing
And plans will be drawn up
And as I stand in the courtyard
Arms outstretched and beaming with love
A shot will ring out and down I will go

And my heart will stop beating but only for a moment
And I will lie on my back gazing up at the clouds
And remarkably and inexplicably I will still be singing
And I will sing to my assassins
How sad it must make you
To do this violent deed but to have so little effect
How proud you must be with your sniper's rifles
How brave you all are with your guns,
How amazing you must be
To shoot a man for singing, and to fail.

2011

Paper-Training the Dog

Daniele took responsibility for it.

She who had always been so squeamish
put up with his poop and his pee.

She guided him through it, rewarding his successes.

She would let him out and he would go to the corner

He was quick to learn and proud to do right.

She hugged him around his velvet neck and stroked his coat.

One night she came to me, tears running down her cheeks.

Oh daddy, she said, I love him so much!

An Impartation

I grew up in the Midwest, and so knew little about being Irish. It wasn't until we moved east that I came face to face with my race.

I was driving through New Haven one snowy winter's night and saw a figure lying by the street. I could tell from the stocking cap it was a human being. I down from my pickup to investigate. It was a slight, very drunk girl of about 15.

I brushed the snow off her and loaded her into the pickup to warm her up, and asked her where she lived. Half-conscious, she dismissed me saying, "You know where I live."

I was stern with her. "I'm sorry, I have no idea where you live."

I was afraid I'd made a mistake helping her. Who knows what happened to her that night, that I could be blamed for?

The girl opened an eye, sized me up and said, "You know what you are?"

"No," I said, "what am I?"

"You're a fookin Mick," she said. "You know how I know?"

"No, how do you know?"

"Because," she hiccupped, "I'm a fookin Mick, too." And passed out.

At that moment a police car pulled up alongside – a female officer, who gathered her up and drove her to the station.

I drove home in the quiet snow. I could not shake the feeling of having been told something true.

Blue Bicycle

The woods at Hidden Falls echoed with the crunch of boots and the snapping of dry sticks. "How much longer?" my young son Jon wanted to know.

"We're almost there," I said, huffing steam.

My daughter Daniele was impatient, too. "What did you say we were looking for?"

"Yes," my bride Rachel joined in, "what is it exactly?"

"Something you'll never see again," I said. It was 1994, and I was luring my kids out into the cold to show them something remarkable.

We came to a clearing, our breath frosting up before us. "It's here," I announced.

There was no sound except the gentle poofs of snow clumps landing. Then Jon cried out, "I see it!"

He pointed up, into the lower reaches of a cottonwood. There, about ten feet from the ground, was a rusted bicycle. It was not sitting in a branch; rather, the branch had somehow grown around the bicycle. The main bar was entirely fixed inside the swarming wood.

"Wow," Daniele said.

I had come across it a few days earlier, walking the dog. I had passed that spot a hundred times and never noticed. But who looks up in case there's a bicycle sealed into a tree? From the corrosion, I guessed the bicycle had been in the tree for 40 years. It was all rust red except for the blue frame.

The four of us were giddy at the idea of a bicycle growing in a tree. Did someone lean it against the tree years ago, and the tree slowly reached out and lifted it up, an inch a year, up into the sky?

Or did someone just throw it up there, and the tree grabbed hold of it, and absorbed it into its flesh?

Did the bike think it was flying? Did the tree think it was riding?

Everyone agreed, we should always keep our eyes peeled for other anomalies. They must be everywhere, we reasoned.

But the next time I came to the clearing, in spring, by myself, not only was the bicycle gone -- but so was the tree.

Over the next couple of years I gently obsessed about finding the bicycle. Sometimes I thought I glimpsed it. But it was just a curl of riverbank vine, pretending to be wheel, or the color of rot pretending to be rust.

What the earth lifted up, it then took back. Everything was in on it. Every falling leaf hid it. Each clump of snow covered it up. Every hiker's footfall sank it deeper in the ground.

It all goes. My children are grown. And one of them is gone. But in 1996 we saw a bicycle riding through the sky, its wheels still turning in the breeze from up the river.

2010

Our Father And Mother

Long before they divorced,
our parents divided us two boys between them,
Pat, because he was older, went with my dad to ball games
and at night they played chess together.
My dad and Pat would drive the Cadillac into Cleveland,
him singing Sinatra in his remarkable vibrato,
flicking his Salem out the window.
Which means my mother got me,
and I accompanied her on trips to the store.
She would buy me a pretzel rod at the register,
take driving exams with me sitting in back,
and making spaghetti and meatballs from scratch.
My most instructive recollection of my mom
was of her making scrambled eggs for me.
She cracked them very purposefully,
and then squeegeed each cup of the shell
with her soft index finder, unwilling to waste
even a molecule of protein.
Raised in the depression, unsure when hard times
might stand in the doorway again,
she kept to this habit the rest of her days.

2010

Picnic Island

This was obviously the scene of some terrible battle.

A deer was cornered by wolves here
in the shadow of the Mendota Bridge
and wolves ripped its body to bits.

Our dogs got in on the act, too, throwing themselves
into the bones and skin and remaining goo,
excited about making off with the smell.

A year later, I see it differently.

The spot where the deer died, and it is just a spot now,
a flattened place in the grass,
is just twenty feet from a column of the great arch bridge,
a hundred feet above.

Wolves didn't kill that creature.

She died where she landed, from a fall from the bridge.

I picture her browsing by the highway,
and making a wrong turn onto the concrete span.
Confused, she continues, until the high beams
of a semi light her up, and she does
what deer have successfully done for millions of years,
leap over the steel railing to safety,
and dance away into sky.

2010

Fish Naked

In the third floor clinic in the Wangenstein Building at the university, a woman with Parkinson's is raising her foot a few inches and slamming it down, over and over, into the pedal of her wheelchair. It is clear the foot is doing it, not her. She is about 80, and sick, and in her sickness she spins the chair around and topples a large oxygen cylinder onto its side, and it rolls away across the waiting room corridor, snapping breathing tubes loose and dragging them after it.

A man with spiky black hair who had been sitting near her goes to help. It's clear he is a stranger, just another patient in the waiting room. He is wearing a burnoose, like Little Steven, and he has an aggressive air about him. If I saw him on the street, I think I would avoid him.

He stops the gas tank from tripping nurses and patients and drags it back to the woman in the chair. He mumbles to her about getting fixed right up. She mumbles back, but beats him on the wrist with her fist to tell him thank you.

He tries to reattach the oversized tank but it just doesn't match up to the chair. A nurse arrives with a portable pack which loops neatly over the back of the chair. The man kneels by the woman, and says, "I'm right here if you need help."

He stands and returns to his seat, the eyes in her shaking head fixed upon him. When he sits I can read his t-shirt. It says FISH NAKED.

Game

Some say the world
will end in stone,
others paper,
some say blade

Fear is the cement block
that smashes every laugh

Laughter is the scissors
that makes chaos bearable

But paper is love
which can smother every fear

Rock, scissors, paper --
fear, laughter, love

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.

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.

Phone Call

I didn't want to make the call. I was scared, scared, scared of the whole thing. But her family made me do it.

"It would mean so much to her."

"It would free her up to die."

And so I sat in my cubicle at work, with workers on both sides of me, waiting for them to patch the call to me.

Around 12:15 it came.

The sister, Elizabeth, spoke. "I'm putting the phone to her ear, Mike. Just start talking."

I could hear erratic breathing on the other end. I wasn't prepared for her to be unable to speak. I had to do all this on my own.

Hello, Julie, I started. Elizabeth has been after me to give you a call, so here I am ...

The breathing quickened on the other end – a signal of excitement?

I told Liz, I said, I haven't even seen you since 1968. After 50 years, I wasn't sure what I would say to you ...

But then it all came back. I remembered the first time I saw you, when I was 14, you 16. It was in the Plato's living room. A handful of high school Thespians. And suddenly you were sitting at the upright piano, banging out the chords of 'Bringing in the Sheaves.'

You were such a trip, Julie -- your giant head of golden hair, like a crazy benign witch in a movie, and your grin, so full of joy and power -- and braces -- making fun of the hymn while doing it every ounce of justice.

I don't even know why I was in that room. I was the neighbor boy.

But I thought, Wow ... a person can do almost anything ... I was SO impressed!

Julie was breathing quickly though her nose now. I heard it as laughing.

My co-worker in the next cube, hearing I was on a very personal call, got up and left. We were alone now.

I started high school and was amazed to find you in my classes. And you saw something in me – I do not know what – and began to cultivate me. Flattering me. Telling me I was smart!

I sort of got it. I was a pretty, nervy kid. Still, to be shown such respect ... from the likes of you ...

So for a year we were school friends. We both lived on Park Avenue, so I would stop off with you and talk about books, and people we knew. You loved to gossip, and I learned that I did, too.

Teacher invited us to take the Ohio High School Scholarship tests. You scored #2 in the state, because you knew everybody – Shakespeare, Dickinson, Pope, all those guys. All I really knew was fun writers like Twain and Charles Dickens. But it was enough for me to score #17.

After that we were the town geniuses, #2 and #17.

I was afraid to think of you as my girlfriend. You were so grand, and you seemed summoned from some past era, like Sarah Bernhardt. When you laughed you put one hand on your breast. Like a duchess -- stylized.

But I just wanted a regular girlfriend, not Sarah Bernhardt.

One night, at your house, you dared me to kiss you, and I did – out on the lawn, under the Scotch pine. I held you in my arms and went in a minute from boy to trouble.

We parted that night, and I ran home under the stars, up the Park Avenue hill and then down again.

I turned 16, moved one town away, and acquired a car, a Buick Special. Now I was bad news. I would pick you up and we would make out on an overlook by Route 2. I drove the car and I drove you, too – Beep beep yeah, remember?

We would jump out of the car, aggressively naked, in the dark, and maul each other. I remember your smell. I loved your smell. I raved at the moon. I pounded you like sand.

Then we went away to different colleges. I once hitchhiked a hundred miles to see you in Ashtabula, and your roommates cleared out so we could be naked together. You were a woman now, and I was something like a man.

And in the morning I hitched away, like Heathcliff with his thumb out, and I never saw you again. 1969.

I heard you married, and divorced. I heard you were in Boston. I learned you became a psychiatric nurse, tending to people without money. I learned you could reach them when no one else could. Because you yourself were seriously bipolar.

I learned you had switched sides and married a woman you loved, and you had a daughter together, who is a doctor now.

You know the rest. We talked on the phone once, before you got sick. You helped me think through my daughter's suicide. You remained proud of me, after all that had happened.

And then you got sick, and here we are, and here I am doing all the talking.

There was a long pause, during which we both breathed and choked.

I just want to tell you one thing, Julie Miller. You were such a friend to my life. You showed me who I could be, and you showed me who you were.

And for that I will always love you Julie, with thanks in my heart and tears in my eyes.

I hung the receiver up. Four days later her brain tumor swept her away.

The funny thing is, I had a pretty ordinary life. The world absorbs small-town hot-shots and belches them out again, as gas.

The other funny thing – both of us had metastatic cancer on that call – but only one of us knew.

Black Forest Fudge Cake with Schicksalsschlage

Excerpted from *The Bavarian Oratorio*

So moist it collapses on itself,
You have to hold it to the serving knife
With the tip of one clean finger

And even then it loses its shape,
It is caught like quicksand in its own firm pudding
And the whipped cream, and the brilliant cherries

Not long ago we raised glasses in triumph
Atop the eagle's roost and dove into this treat
As we dove into the adjoining lands

It was the dessert of triumph,
And the champagne evanesced, and the beer
Barrels emptied and the tubas blew

And the ruddy people linked arms
Like joyful sausages dangling
And they danced to October's bright light

The same ones would be awakened in the night
And be trucked to the outskirts of town
To clamber through the lime and fumes

And acknowledge what they had done

Now they are crying, the cake in the earth
that was once so delicious, the cherries

So plump and so red, we did not know,
we could not know,
who could ever have known such a thing

I saw that look of shame on my friend Jurgen's face,
Jurgen who was born after the war,
Jurgen who must live with this association,

But still keeps those pictures atop his piano,
Of Aunt Ursula and Uncle Leo having a laugh,
It is Christmas and all are enjoying

This chocolate cake impaled upon the fork,
A cake so moist it can't have been baked,
This is the cake our ancestors ate

So perfect with honeyed hot coffee

When Family Members Die

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

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

Fathers are foolishness given a voice that then has nothing to
say.

A son would be like being smitten by a smith,
a hot hammer hitting you on the head
like nothing could be, pray God could never be.

But a daughter is the end, it is the man turned inside out --
his soul become a flower, his one shot at beauty.

2010

My Thuggish Ways

Testosterone is what causes it all –

The prison riots, the racial cleansing, the buffalo kills,
the beatings occurring behind every door.

It is an anabolic steroid in nature,
indispensable for reproduction, yet it accounts
For all the wars and all the murders.

You have to have it to be president,
It must be there if you are to penetrate the end zone,
To maintain peace in the seraglio.

Nature in its wisdom identifies the worse cases
And triggers the hormone to destroy the most dangerous
individual.

That is what's happened to me.

On the one hand I repent now
of all the violence that streamed from these hands.

How many men I have humiliated,
whipping their faces with my bloated member.

How many woman's hearts I have broken,
Because I was never content, I always sought more,
Laughing like your defeat was a debt I was owed.

On the other I rejoice as I have been chosen,
Among all living men, like a cloud, like a feather,
like an afternoon rain, to transform into angel.

2017

Braid Rug

Our parents sometimes fought. I didn't know this at that time, but my dad liked to party and my mom wanted him home.

There was a reckless foolishness in his position, and a joylessness in hers. They hated each other as if there were no higher calling.

Three small kids sat on a braid rug in our dining room. The rug was circular, like a target. It was late for us, especially me, the youngest.

Our mother knelt behind us. She used us as a shield, or perhaps just to expose his true nature to us. "See who your father is. See!"

My dad was drunk and foul. I understand, looking back, he was in despair in some way, and demonstrating the depth of his shame. Our mother was, too. Their lives had galloped away from them. They had nothing now, except this.

I always suspected they were crazy. Unable to enjoy the most obvious things -- running in the grass, putting arms around the dog, jumping off the porch. Life was riddled with delights, but you would never know that from grown-ups.

Their idea of fun was cigarettes and whiskey. They were full of passion and devoid of laughter. Having children killed the children in them.

Because I understood the least, I was the luckiest person in the room.

1994

My History as a Man

When I was young and handsome
girls brightened like pennies
when I drew near.
Wonderful, ignorant girls.

Later, smarter, they pulled back from me.
Even though I meant no harm.
Well, I didn't mean much harm.
Not too much, anyway.

Now, they don't even know that I'm there.
I'm like an old pair of pants
flapping on a pole.
Oh ladies, I miss when you feared me.

Papa's Pizza on Thomas Avenue

They serve house wine in jam jars,
and a combo is playing,
and the owner proclaims them
the return of Francis Albert.

A woman is shown a table,
and when she undoes her hood
she is slender, with a high forehead
and tiny teeth a bit apart.

At another table a girl
who is at most eighteen
and knows she is dynamite
squints and laughs.

I recall that my father
fought another man
in the nursing home
over a woman with a facelift.

The singer loses his way,
reads lyrics from his cellphone.
Though the wine was refrigerated
I understand everything.

Expectancy

(found poem)

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

Charlene buys a lightbulb
with a lifetime of 932 hours.

How many weeks can Charlene
expect this lightbulb to last
if she uses it exactly
seven hours and 40 minutes
every single day?

The Grate on Carroll Avenue

Lucy pauses at the storm sewer grate and she trembles.

Imagine having a nose that can process so much information
and also the underworld festering below.

even a little dog understands we are living above
a giant breathing thing, and we feel
the heave and fall of its ribs.

The beast may be sleeping and pose no immediate danger
but there's no mistaking the smell of the flesh of dead dogs
and fish and cats and rats and raccoons below,
rotting meat dangling between the giant teeth.
A little dog sniffs and she shudders.

2011

Goat Boy

Driving in the cold and dark through landlocked St. Paul --
1212 miles of hard land to the Atlantic,
1704 miles north to Hudson Bay,
2173 miles west to the Pacific
1340 more down to the Gulf of Mexico.

My high beams shine on the international airport sign.
Imagine that, instead of crawling across the tundra
on skinned knees to get to work
you could board a plane and in a matter of hours,
alight in some beautiful place.

I would opt for the Isle of Malta,
with their knights, falcons, and funny dogs.
I would tend the goats high on a green cliff,
me and the other goatherds guzzling wine
from a lamb's bladder, and chucking down
those malted milk balls that come in the cartons,
surrounded on all sides by blue sea.

2006

Look What The Sun Has Lit Up

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

Inside our hearts there are other hearts,
strings of motion sewn into cinematography,
threads of voices pressed onto blue rectangles.
It's the medicine dropper's quivering eye,
it's the sensation of lubricants passing between us
and over us and through us
like battalions of red roses.

Our hearts pass by one another on pulleys,
See them gliding by on silver conveyor belts
drawing near their eventual destinations.

1977

Hand Shadows

When I was five I imagined I was favored by God.

For a time I thought I might be a dancer.

I spent time in my mom's mirror,
tapdancing furiously like Shirley Temple in sneakers,
attempting the difficult "bring it all home" step,
but only getting winded and stumbling.

I hated St. Mary's Church in Olmsted Falls,

Stand up, sit down, praise praise praise.

Instead I gazed at my praying hands and began to intertwine my
fingers

in compelling ways – like the hand puppet prophets
of the Old Testament, half prayer, half hand ballet.

I believed God saw me, he saw my digital interlocutions,

And he reached down to me in the pew,
on a beam of floating light, and said to me,

Behold, this is what I have waited for all these ages.

I imagined I would die and come face to face with God.

And he would point to the record and say,

Um, we have some real problems here.

But I would hug God around the neck,
Which nobody else ever dared to do, and say,
Hey, old man, this is me you're talking to.

2005

Like A Joke

A good poem is like a joke.
It begins and it ends and in between
It triggers a shift in expectations.
You thought A, but it turned out to be B.
So you are fooled, which is always good.
Our presumptions are what make us hilarious.
The change overtakes us like a choking fit
and for a while we oscillate between
a clench and a release,
a test of our virtue, a test of our strength.
Then it parts and the new information
washes over us, blessing us
like a blossoming field.

2015

En Route to the Lecture

Woodward Mitchell, 89, was pulled over by police at 2:45 a.m.

"Where are you going at this hour of night?" The cop asked, shining a light in his face.

Mitchell responded: "I'm en route to a lecture about alcohol abuse and the effects it has on the human body."

The officer wasn't convinced. "Who gives a lecture on alcohol abuse in the middle of the night?"

"That would be my wife," Mitchell replied.

My Assault

It's New Year's morning, dark and rainy. I am returning from the airport after dropping Rachel off. I turn onto St Clair at Snelling. At Davern a white SUV pulls out and heads straight at me. I lay on my horn, thinking this will jar the driver into avoiding me. Instead, he accelerates and sidles rapidly up against my car, perhaps 3-4 inches away, locking me in.

I am so scared, I can't put my car into gear.

I roll down my window -- it's all I can think to do. I see the other guy for just a second -- thirtyish, tallish, and wearing a Balaclava mask. "The fuck's wrong with you?" he says.

Seconds later, I wake up, and my jaw and teeth are sore. He had poked me hard with something -- a gun butt or pool cue? It's the hardest I've ever been hit.

It took me weeks to understand what had happened. The guy was an off-duty police officer. He was leaving a house on Davern after a night of partying, and he was drunk. It annoyed him that I beeped my miserable Toyota Corolla horn at him, so he taught me a lesson. He hit me with his nightstick, and drove off.

2016

Remainders

Copies of my poems went on sale at Odegard Books,
The precise word is remaindered,
Marked down from three ninety five to just the ninety five,
And it hit me that this gambit by the bookstore
Was just what people had been waiting for.

Sure, you expect people to hold back,
Especially at today's prices. Three ninety five is
A piece of change, no doubt about it,
And there must be people who thumb the book
And pat it with one hand as if weighing the
Poems against the expense, the expense against
The poems, take one step toward the cashier
And then fail in their purpose, put the book back
In the rack, and pick up a copy of American Poetry Review,
Beautiful things wonderfully said,
For under three dollars, a wonderful buy, instead.

But who could balk at ninety five cents,
Why, that's less than a dollar with a nickel left over,
You could buy the poems and have enough to
Handle the sales tax, nineteen for the poet and
One for the State of Minnesota and its beautiful
Forests and waterfowl.

[Actually, all nineteen don't go to the poet. I was
Promised a ten percent royalty, which meant forty cents

On the full price, and the fine print here says
When a book goes remainder there isn't really
Any royalty at all, but I don't care, I didn't
Write them for the forty cents, you see,
I wrote them for this feeling I'm having right now
Of breaking through, of getting out,
Of seeing the birds I'd stored in the box
Fly out of it, white wings fair
clapping the morning air.]

Ninety five cents for thirty five poems,
That's less than three pennies apiece. Here's one
About some weeds growing in sidewalk cracks,
So what, it's only six lines long but at three cents
Who's going to complain? Here's another,
A beautiful lyric, a love poem connecting
To the Italian futurist movement of the nineteen-teens,
It was published in a number of respected magazines,
For less than three cents you won't need a vacation tour
This year, just read the words and feel their awful power.

Or the final poem, I call it "The Light," which was all
My life in sonnet length, how there were things
I thought I always wanted, but when I got them they were
Different, or I was unable to recognize them -- such pathos
As would melt the stony heart, and I lay it all down
For you, vulnerable, small, the shattered clown,

The paper trembles with the grief of truth,
Because here it is, softcover renaissance,
And all it costs is three lousy cents.
My ear to the ground I can detect the build
Of momentum, people swearing off bad habits forever,
People afraid to look one another in the eye
Now looking and seeing the pain and love that had been there
All along, now reaching out, fingertips touching,
The sting of tears collecting in the corners
Of millions and thousands, the soft collapse
Of a hundred brittle barriers of reason and attitude
Finally available, the incandescent word
At prices the masses can afford.

Let us go now, you and I, to Odegards.
For life has many sales but few true bargains.
Let us take the silver coins and hand them to the person
And remember to ask for the receipt, if you're a poet
Your whole life is deductible.
Oh daughters of Homer gather round his knees
And hear him sing his saltstrong songs.
There are myriad of you there,
A speckled galaxy of brave little lights,
Fresh washed garments tucked under your knees,
Eager for instruction and keen for meaning,
He cannot see you but he hears you breathing.

Death by Gopher

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

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

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

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

You are in a fine state now, pointing your pistol down your
pants

and squeezing off a round and lying down, staring up,
the Milky Way all creamy and a shooting star too quick to draw,
the snap of a log in the fire --

Close those eyes, brave chevalier, and be certain in your heart
that nature has never been your friend.

2006

Why Did the Buddha Sit Under the Tree?

To get to the other side.

2006

I Married Pippi Longstocking

It was her adorable face, her red hair and freckles,
those joyful constellations, the blissful pigtails
lifted up by a coat hanger within.

The sunny disposition -- you never saw her sulk.
She was naturally convinced of the beauty of things,
including herself -- so why did I take her away
from the magical island and polka dot horse?

In the city she immersed herself in study.

As she came to grips with the pain of the suffering world,
the smile that transfixed me faded.

One day she could take it no longer and left on an expedition
To bring medicine and good counsel to the nations.

I think of her in her tent, slapping at the fleas,
and I hope thinking of me from time to time,
and the love that I bore for her,
and wonder why did I take her from Villa Villekulla?

2016

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,

You think you're so smart, you're chickenshit about this and that.

If we knew perhaps we could change and stop annoying others
so.

But our friends don't want to hurt us, they don't want

To be the ones who tell the terrible truth.

Neither do they want to lose us, to be banished as disloyal

while we skip off to be with new friends

who only see the selves we have repaired and painted over,

but will never really know.

2008

My Mom.

When I hid among the corn, in the field behind our house,

You came and found me, and led me back home.

I was only five, and I loved you madly, but I had to get away.

At 13 I ran off to the seminary.

At 15 I flew to California to meet my father.

At 17 I drove back to California, bringing friends.

I ran off to college. I ran into drugs.

I lived in imagination, always putting distance between us.

Every time I left I broke your heart.

All I ever did was break your heart.

And then I did not see you so much,

and you got sick with the diabetes, and your feet turned black,

and you stuck herself with insulin five times every day.

No one loved me so fiercely.

You would kill komodo dragons with a plastic fork

to get to me, and still I ran away.

And then you died, and we put you in the ground.

Now I think of you five times every day,

every time I give myself a stick.

2009

Candy Bars Seek Answers

Every so often another treat marches forward
and is expelled.

There goes PayDay. Bye bye Musketeers.

No one knows why, or what happens then.

We hear a wrapper tearing without --
perhaps our colleague is being stripped for glory --
and then -- nothing.

Face it, each passing moment is the closest we get to death.

Every day the current page is ripped away

And we advance one notch closer.

The chips and candy fret in their cellophane --

Almond Joy, Butterfinger, Heath Bar (the favorite of King Lear).

Is today the day you have longed for, dreaded?

Kit Kat, Milky Way, Mr Goodbar.

A great anxiety shudders through the machine.

As to what awaits us on the other side,

once the thunder rattles our home,

once we are swallowed up by darkness,

after we are cast into the pit?

2011

My Job

As a child I had a prophetic recurring dream.
The sky was a dome of porcelain or glass,
You could climb to it on a ladder.
And I saw a crack begin to form,
And it was my job to repair the crack.
I climbed the ladder to the brink of the sky
and I was patching the crack with spackle
When another crack formed,
and another, and another.
The profoundest grief swept over me,
Knowing my job was impossible to do.
Shards of sky began to rain down
And I could do nothing to stop it.
Then I woke up to my sister dying in one room,
My father snoring drunk in the next,
My mother sobbing in the third.
The atoms of the universe were coming apart,
And my job, repairing the crack.

2003

The Shoe

It was a new pair of brogans you had only had a week
and glorious it was to stride down the corridor,
leather heels snapping crisply below you like a man who
belonged

And then a moment, a simple misstep, and everything
transforms.

You feel your foot sliding, you sense a slight change
in altitude, it can't be but it is, you have stepped in it again.

And now you are this other thing.

If only it were only stinky. if only it were only slimy.

But the deed goes deeper down than that.

It has remarkable powers of adhesion.

Rinsing it off with a garden hose doesn't work,

because the cold water triggers its waxiness,

and it grips your lowers like the devil's paws.

You know this to be true, that when you get it
on the bottoms of your shoes it finds its way
into every rubber caracol, like rain soaking into the thirsty earth,
and you blame the shoe but what can you do,
scraping it with a stick is like pushing cold cookie dough,
you will never get it all off, there is no spatula ductile enough
to round up every crumb and squeegee it away
the substance has nested, pulsing and warm
like a tumor taking up residence within.

And you could slap yourself because of course
this is why the Japanese take off their shoes,
they're smart and clean people, and careful where they step,

the world is full of careful people who know how to walk
without slipping in some slop that someone should have picked
up
and tracking it into the sacred home.
And even though you have done everything,
washed it and sponged it and sprayed it,
done everything you could think of but lick it clean,
which, when you think about the qualities of the tongue,
is probably the way you ought to have gone,
and even though you have buried the rags and implements,
the washcloths and brushes, the towels and kleenex
and tamped it all down with your sole clean heel,
it's no use, it's your life companion now,
it will have business ramifications for sure,
people will look you in the eyes and then
wrinkle their noses, your dead mother in heaven
sits up in her chaise and she wrinkles her nose,
and the salty aroma bleeds into each pore,
and every cell membrane in you wrinkles its nose,
the stowaway has metastasized, and gone to your brain
there it sits steaming and panting at the controls
and it is there for the duration
Now you and the shoe are no longer two,
you have fused into one awful entity,
the fellow traveler that wouldn't stop talking
that imagined it was blessing you with its presence,
and you look at it, dismayed but not contesting the basic justice,
that this was coming all the while, the guy

who couldn't be bothered to watch where he was walking.

2004

The Trumpeter at Willow Falls

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

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

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

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

2007

Not Far From The Beach At Plum Island

Here the ocean makes its ocean-sound, like the roar
of a freight train pounding through the night.
My friend Dirk calls such analogies blasphemy.
Oceans and trains are not the same.
One is the original and it deserves credit --
why point to helicopters while dragonflies flit quietly by?
History talks about the boatloads of people
who crisscrossed the waters, no mention of all the other debris.
Dear friends, who wouldn't want to live in Dirk's world --
original and clean, honest and pure --
set sail on the sturdiest twig at hand?
Instead I brush the sand from my pants.
On the ground is one of those plastic collars
six-packs of beer come in, and strangle seagulls --
I stuff it in my pocket and head for the car.

1977

Hearting The Ape

An ape who goes to work all day
And comes home tired but ready to play.
An ape who walks on two hind feet
But takes great care not to step on me
An ape who loves me and teaches me words,
And when I am sleeping does not disturb.
How odd that dogs should live with apes,
are at the door when they are late.
Opposable thumbs mean different habits.
And no one gives body rubs like primates.
Strange other species, so different from mine,
Thank you for being my valentine!

2011

Tablet

By Piyassili of Assyria, 1218 BC

The people who are made to feel ashamed every day
are not the people who should feel ashamed.

The people who should feel ashamed
are the people unable to feel ashamed
yet heap shame by the bundle every day
on the troubled, the poor and despised.

Charley

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

Outjumping the Fireball

In the movies, it happens all the time –
The hero and his girlfriend running from danger,
Just as there is an explosion, and a ball of fire expands
In their direction, but they are running so fast and so urgently
that they escape the licking flames by just a few inches.
I am always happy that they escape, because the entire movie
Up until this point has served to form a bond between
The man, the woman, and the people in the seats.
It would be terrible if, instead of escaping,
They were set on fire and we had to watch that sorry business.
But come on – that's not how explosions work.
Instead of chasing people for a second or two or three
through a mineshaft, or a skyscraper, or a space station,
explosions are instantaneous – there is no “second or two”
during which your legs can whisk you out of danger.
It also suggests that the problem with explosions
Is the flameball, and not the merciless shockwave
That crushes tissue – skin, skulls, eardrums, lungs,
all the stuff that comprises what we are.
Still it's pleasant to imagine that running fast and being virtuous,
And having a beautiful blonde girlfriend hand in hand
will keep physics from doing what it does to us.
But we should post a warning, for the sake of our young people.
Don't try to outrun exploding C-4. Embrace the blonde
And consign your spirit to the fire.

2016

Drama King

The moment you cried out your disapproval,
Your stirring Hey! lashed out against all falsity --
so sweet, the anger of being almost innocent,
the voice of that part of the sinful world
that did not believe it was part of the sinful world.
It rippled your indignation,
because there is now no distinguishing real from false
and there is no going back
until blood has been shed
and the old skin of need
has been slithered out of for good
and discarded in a husk of spent diamonds.
And in that moment you were lost because
You enjoyed it perhaps a little too much,
And a sickening part of you knew
it would come back to that moment
and try to recreate it, again and again and again,
summoning fresh feeling against the lies of the world
and this time really give it the gas,
and this time your denunciation would be
more artful and more telling,
and this time the world would say,
Wow, this is even better than the other time
and it surely is consummated.
You are like a lunkheaded dog with only one trick,
only instead of rolling over you summoned
all the authenticity you could simulate on such short notice

and then like the leg of a wheel you spoke
and you were too young and too beautiful to explain
that they owed it to themselves to go fuck themselves royally
because you were in no mood to prostitute
the depth of your passion to salve their idiot wounds
and even on the off-chance that you did, they would just say
yes, that, there, you see, that's the thing you do
that is so remarkable.

And then you must choose between killing them
with the only object available to you,
an ice-cream scoop with a pewter handle
and what a concavity that will make in their foreheads
as if they had been blessed with a single wonderful idea
but now it has been dug out and discarded --
or turn your back on them
and wrap yourself in your cloak
and the night
and that will be that for them,
the beauty done and gone
and not to be darkening this doorstep again any time soon
and like the old trader, legless in Abyssinia,
you are borne away on a litter,
in a fever, raving and
firing your pistols

2011

Teaching Her to Drive

Because she was phobic, it took us six years.

She was afraid of oncoming cars,

so afraid she put her hands up when they passed.

I had to find places where she felt safe,

so I chose cemetery roads,

with their strange curves,

and mourners making their way back to their cars,

white kleenex against black clothing.

We graduated to suburban lanes, practicing every Saturday,

month after month, until I let her drive us back into the city

the length of South Lyndale Avenue.

Three times she failed her exam,

and each time I encouraged her.

Everyone fails a couple of times, I said.

You'll get it, don't worry.

But I was shaking the fourth time out,

exiting the car and fretting over how she would take

a fourth failure.

After the exam she sat in the car with the instructor

for what seemed like an hour.

When she stepped out, she walked across the blacktop

toward me, a grin slowly forming on her face,

and I broke down blubbing,

tears running into my mouth, thinking,

This will change everything.

2010

My Uncle Douglas, 1925-?

My mother had a brother Douglas who also vanished
and was never heard from again after he left Otisville in 1964.

There was a feeling among the brothers and sisters
that Douglas was not their biological brother,
that he might have been left on their doorstep,
because there was something awfully Mexican about him --
the olive skin, the delineated lips.

"He had that Mexicali look," said Jane, who never knew
what she was talking about. Why would Ma keep
such a thing from us, they all wondered,
after Douglas disappeared that winter, somewhere in Southern
Illinois.

Because he arrived as a baby, was the answer,
he was some poor migrant girl's baby
and Ma had a heart for living things, despite
chasing chickens in the yard with an ax held high.

Uncle Doug had no clue himself, and no one ever
spoke to him about it, about who he was, and where he came
from.

He was the best rider and the best quarterhorse trainer.
He was the only member of the family who ever smiled,
as near as I could tell, and when he did you could count every
tooth.

My favorite memory was him swinging me on a thick rope
suspended from the hay barn beam, the smell
of fresh-cut grass stacked high around us, and his delighted face,
and the brogue that even he had, somehow.

2007

My Uncle John Mulligan (1919-?)

I only met my Uncle John twice, as a young boy of 5 and then 6. He was handsome and craggy and blonde and shy, and he spoke with a soft brogue.

John Mulligan worked the family farm in Otisville, milking the cows and running the horses, plus night shift assembly work at AC Delco in Flint. But then one day he left home, pretty much with a bag on a stick, and rode the rails around the west. Washington, Idaho, Utah.

My mom often sang, while she did the wash, about the downside of leaving home.

Why oh why oh why oh why-o ... did I ever leave Ohio?

Leaving home back then was a kind of self-shunning -- bad outcomes were to be expected. Railyards were dangerous places. Bedding down with other traveling men -- paranoid, hateful, criminal -- was dangerous.

John took jobs out in the world digging ditches and picking cherries and apples and artichokes.

After a time the postcards from him stopped, and in 1971 a news report came out about a Northern California peach orchard that was full of buried dead men. It was the worst murder scene in U.S. history up to that time. You've probably heard the murderer's name -- Juan Corona. Instead of paying men for their labor, he raped and killed them by stabbing and hacking their bodies.

Twenty five bodies were found, mostly too decomposed to identify, but my mother had a sick feeling John was in one of those shallow graves, because the last card from him said he was picking melons in Sutter County.

We never heard from him again. So if he wasn't buried under the peaches, he might as well of been, the way we saw it.

He and I never spoke, except once on the phone, and I remember his voice.

I also remember him lifting me up and placing me on the shoulders of a black Angus calf he and his brothers named Mike after me.

I remember looking up at him and his kind eyes. You could tell he was a kind man, maybe sad for a reason you would never know.

Next year, I came back to the farm. I was excited to see my bully namesake Mike again.

But Mike had been eaten by them – by John, and Bob, and Jane, and Doug, and the youngest, Craig, and my grandpa and grandma -- because that's how they do on a farm.

2007

From The Roof Of My Apartment Building In Downtown Minneapolis

The moon is down to the cuticle now, the stars nod in
and out. The night goes as dark and as deep as
the hole in the potato shed I used to hide in
on the farm in Michigan my grandfather
Bill had for sixty eight years
and then
lost

1975

Hesperia, California

*Hesperia is "the western land," "the land of the setting sun."
What the ancient Greeks called Italy.*

I bullied my father but I didn't know this until I was 56 years old.

My brother, driving me out to our dad's house in Hesperia
to clean up, just after he died, let me know.

"He wanted to live the life he made for himself here," Pat said.

"You always tried to drag him back to the bad old days,
the Ohio days, the life he had failed at."

My brother was right. My dad had lost a child. His wife kicked
him out.

He was blacklisted by car makers nationwide for irregularities.

So at age 42 he abandoned his children and moved far away,
to a place where there was no auto industry,
California. He was only 42, young enough to start again.

Naturally this second life was more faithful,
more disciplined, less riddled with betrayal.

And there I was, through my phone calls and visits,
the son who could not let go, a constant reminder
of everything he tried to leave behind.

I understand better now that my dad's
second act was meant to erase the first,
and I was supposed to admire his talent for selling,
his Ban-Lon lifestyle, the fact he never chose to wear a tie,
the ranch-house built along the edge of a golf course,
his backswing in the desert where he created new life.

Instead, I reminded him of what had been,
the children he left behind, believing it was their fault he was
going.

Perhaps because I'm a malicious person.

Or perhaps because it was the only childhood I had,
and all I had to do was speak into his ear
the word Cleveland.

On a Train Rolling Out of Berea

I take a seat in the middle of the car, and open my copy of Robert Frost. Within moments I hear a strange, crackling voice behind me.

"I see you," a voice says, in a cruel, insinuating way. "I see you. I see you. I know you."

I freeze, reluctant to turn around and see who my accuser is.

Then I hear the voice again: "Oh, you think you're so lovable. So lovable. You're so special."

I'm rattled. I pretend to return to my Frost, but who am I kidding? There is probably some kind of psycho back there -- some kind of crazy seer who cuts to the heart of people on public transportation. I don't dare look.

"You must be some kind of poet. You're so special."

And here's the thing -- a part of me does feel that way at times. I do want the whole world to love and admire me. And sometimes I egg them on, being pleasant, hoping they will like me back. You know, asking for it.

"Yes, you're just God's little treasure, aren't you?" she asks now in a childlike voice. "God's little treasure."

Then I think, No, that's not fair! I'm just a guy like anyone else. Sure, I read poetry on the RTA, but it's just because reading settles me on trips. And poems are just a page or so in length. You can flip around.

O spirit, if that's what you are -- Can't you see -- can't you sympathize with me just the tiniest bit?

I'm just struggling to make my way through life, hoping to avoid the worst kinds of pain.

Why can't you cut me just a little bit of slack?

I turn in my seat to rebut her, but all I see is an odd old woman with a birdcage in her lap, holding a wrinkled knuckle out to a pretty green parrot.

My Cousin Lanny Backs a 28-Foot FedEx Truck Into a C130 at 22 mph

The transmission was unfamiliar to him:

Lanny was accustomed to the 5-speed model,
with the standard H, but this thing was 13-speeds
plus synchromesh and a range selector
and the thing that looked like first gear turned out to be reverse,
so he hit the plane accelerating to about 22 mph.

The far wing dipped down and scraped the tarmac.

The body of the plane shuddered and slid forward
while the cargo door jumped off its rail and sailed across
the landing pad and Lanny looked back at the damage
he had caused and he knew he was
looking for work again.

2007

Eyes Out, Ears Peeled

We listened too long, we were too sure.

We expected a signal at some odd hour.

We glared at one another in wild apprehension

We paid much too much attention.

2005

Drama

The unemployed get to sleep in,
It's the only benefit they are entitled to.

The motorists on Ayd Mill Road
bear down because it's road construction
and the lanes are narrowing even
as a thunderstorm races
to collide with the sunrise.

The sky is red with melodrama.
Tires sound, wipers thud, a rainbow
Appears in the sky to the west
Against the purple cumulus.

Everyone's grip on their steering wheel
Tightens, we mustn't
be late to work.

2008

We Worry What Will Take Us Out

What we want to avoid are the prolonged diseases,
Death by slow torture, the breath that comes shorter,
the body's steady retreat from functionality.
We don't want to die when we feel abandoned
or at a basepoint of failure in our lives.
That would not be okay.

An ideal death would come as a surprise,
A bus suddenly swacking us in the face,
a bomb blast painting our X-ray on the wall,
a wrecking ball with our name on it at the door.
Lightning taps us on the shoulder – hey buddy.
Anything sudden is okay.

Ideally we are bounding up the steps
to accept a major prize in Stockholm
and the 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.

2012

What a Rotten Thing to Say

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

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

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

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

Bar bar ar ar bar bar bar bar ...

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

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

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

Bar bar ar ar bar bar bar bar ...

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

A Flag

is what we should be like
a flag in a stiff cold wind --
every fiber stretched taut,
buffeted until
we come apart,
every moment
ripping at our seams.

2009

Do Birds Have Knees?

Forget about all the eff-ups you've made.

Thinking about them only effs you up more.

Stop worrying what the future has in store.

Anxieties leave marks in your underpants.

The best policy I have found is to plant yourself
on your back stoop and watch the robins hop about,
their knees bending backwards instead of forwards.

Think about how they do that, or don't.

(What we think are their knees are actually ankles.)

You must learn to go forward somehow.

Eat when you feel the need to eat.

When it's time to go down, for the day

Or for ever, give yourself permission
to draw down the blinds.

But stay on the lookout, because --
you never know, you know?

2010

La Femme

The woman was hanged onstage
In a performance of The Handmaid's Tale
and the lifting herniated a disk
and since the opera things have been difficult.
We walked backward taking baby steps
through New Mexico and Utah.
When she is in spasm, I knead out the knots
and tangles from her spine.
When I massage her I work from her neck bones to her soles.
She whimpers like a doe, if does whimper –
I don't know.
She is the general directing the attack, indicating
with a nod what happens next and how.
She is the wounded lioness clambering up a hill
and despite the pain she will make it to the top,
biting her lip all the while.
We have a deal that when we say farewell
and she beams at me as she is doing now,
waiting on the railway landing,
She will be the femme, she will be my lion-woman
And I will be her prey for the duration.

2006

Twenty Six Below

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

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

But look at Lucy in the snow, rising time and again

like a sea monster raging through the drifts.

2011

Naked, At The Taylor Falls Campground

I am finishing my sip of Naked Mighty Mango when I see
a bee climb inside the plastic cup.

It is a yellowjacket bee, and his abdomen is twitching
spasmodically

as if to sting the cup, like a beating heart or a painful boner.

He climbs out of the cup and sees me move the Naked away
from him.

He sees the entirety of me now, this smirking Killroy
looming over the table, toying with him and his serious mission.
So I stop. I have been trying to do better by bees.

Now the bee is waddling along a closed copy
of Tim Nolan's book *The Sound of It*, a good collection,
still humping the cover with his swollen thing.

He disappears for a moment under the cover and then
reappears

on the cover art, a photo of a crosscut tree trunk,
concentric whorls like a giant thumbprint.

I am enjoying the book but the bee seems less impressed
and humps along with his pulsating body part.

I wonder if the Naked Mighty Mango made him drunk,
and the bee is on a bender sashaying across the picnic table.

Or – maybe it was Tim's poems – which always seem to be
Asking the questions, What is going on around us?

What have we gotten ourselves into? -- to which the bee
had only a momentary introduction, yet it is having

this theatrical tumescent effect.

Now I notice there is something wrong with him.

The bee is walking with a kind of limp, dragging leg number five.

Then, dummy me, I see his left wing is not even there,

he is a disabled bee, something very dramatic has happened to him,

a story we can only guess at, selfless and possibly heroic,

or possibly some bumbling incident like getting smacked

by a windshield on this most beautiful noonday in spring --

I could go on but it would be disrespectful to hypothesize,

It's enough for now to say, These are the elements

I witnessed today – poetry, fruit juice, existential bee.

Defending the Cake

for Carol Connolly on her birthday, 2013

We consider ourselves virtuous when we hold up our hands
as the Christ held up his hand to the Devil
and we say No Devil, No.

If we break the rules and begin eating cake,
we know it will be our undoing,
flesh will swell like the waves of the ocean,
and wash over all our hopes,

We will be true cake-eaters then,
lotos-eaters, Ambrosians, the strictly upper crust,
Cake is a danger to us, it clogs the cell walls
and sweetens up the blood till we become cake
ourselves, diabetic and crumbling.

Calvin was against it, it did not suitably mortify,
and because it did not bless the darkness
it was in fact sin – we even call it sinful
because we remember the story of the garden
and the serpent, and the devil's sweet meal.

We don't even know how to make cake any more --
it's a confection in a tin we place on the potluck table
and quickly step away, because it came
from the grocery store or it came from a mix –
if it looks like cake that's all that matters, we think –
still the feeling of shame that we didn't care enough
to make a true cake from scratch, while this storebought
may be lighter than air, it satisfies the requirements

without satisfying the mouth glomming onto it,
this fake cake just dust occupying the form of a cake
It is chemistry by proxy, it is an imposter, a fraud,
it is the embodiment of our falsity. And yet,
through history it was an idea that had heft,
it was a gift of first fruits, it was the best that was in us,
the angel's food of our better natures
Because you do not bake a cake on a Tuesday, you wait
until something momentous comes round,
an anniversary of some grand event and you put into it
all that is good that we have, all the impossible things
we did not have when we dwelt in the cave,
shivering, battle-bled, cakeless and cold.
See look what we put in it ...
cinnamon, coconut, lemon zest, nuts,
the frosting, the pudding, the squeak
of the fork on the china like a bow upon a rosined string.
Cake is our vision of the life we don't see
yet flows around us in swirling mystery,
like a starry night of dark chocolate.
It is an expression of our love for one another,
if I knew you were coming you know what I would have baked ...
It is less the joy than the symbol of joy
It is so good on the tongue
as I look into your eyes one more time --
Oh let us eat cake as the act of love it is!

2013

When I Dash Off a Page

I throw down the ballpoint and say,

Take that!

You ignorant unaware world,

you thought you were complete

but I have added to you.

I have done my insolent dance

around your flaccid sombrero.

I snap my fingers over my shoulder and say

Take that, you who thought we were done.

2011

Returnees

Increasingly it became our own again
as if we prodigals had not quit it in the night
and run away, bags bouncing
on our backs.

Even in memory the place was always fixed,
the green land gleaming in the dew.
Until it became a way of being,
Except from the delinquent likes of us.

Till we felt ourselves unworthy of any home.
The son in scripture was not welcome at first
He made several tries before getting it right
First at the crossroads, then at the wellhead
where the women spoke into their hands.
Finally the doorway of his father's house
and they were all there waiting wide eyed.

Eventually the spell is broken and we are let back in
And all is grand then what with the music,
and the rejoicing, and the general carrying on.

2008

Dear Friend

Why do I twist your arm into coming to my reading
and make you sit through all this bother --
as if you need to be tested, to prove you deserve me
when it is exactly the opposite way around.
What I should do instead is plunk your hand in mine
and thank you for your love despite, and not because of this.
What a gift that you indulge me as if this has worth,
what a generous pretense on your part that these stupid stories
signify more than our years of laughter and affection --
as if there are other things in this crummy world
when we both know, as a matter of pure fact, there are not.

2011

Logic

Rotten fish guts are better than nothing --

And yet nothing is better than champagne.

Thus rotten fish guts are better than champagne.

Man-eating tigers devour men alive --

But women cannot be said to be men.

Thus man-eating tigers can be expected to pass on

The opportunity to devour live women.

The B52s were delightful and deranged creators of pop confections.

B52s killed over a million persons in WWII bombing raids.

Therefore the B52s should be put on trial for war crimes.

People born without brains cannot live.

Mary called Ed a brainless nitwit. Ergo:

We must stab Ed in the head with a Phillips screwdriver.

2011

Lime Green Polyester Slacks

You drop in without warning on your father after not seeing him for 5 years.

He is a manufacturer's rep living in the Vermont District with his new wife, Phyllis.

You sleep that night on a cot in his home office.

Around dawn, a stranger enters the apartment and grabs the jeans you have draped over yourself -- the pants with two twenties in the pocket.

He never sees the man's face, but he wakes to see him leaving the room.

Phyllis shouts "Get back here, you asshole!"

Your dad is up now, too, shouting "Let him go!" -- he doesn't want her to get hurt.

But Phyllis, 50, is off like a cheetah, flying after the thief in the red jumpsuit she had fallen asleep in on the TV couch.

She chases him out onto the street, beating him on the back with her fists, until he stops, whips her with your pants, and knocks her into a parked Dodge Dart, breaking her right humerus bone on the mirror assembly.

She makes her way back into the apartment and sits panting in the breakfast nook, holding up what looks like straw in her good hand.

For two days you had to wear his lime-green, hand-me-down polyester golf slacks.

"I got that bastard's hair!" she says. "But he got your dungarees."

1968

Dayton Avenue

Late at night the neighborhood is so quiet it hums.

No one coming, no one going.

Occasionally a light in one of the houses,

Suggests someone up reading, or they fell asleep that way,
and the light is a thin blanket on their bodies.

A block away there is the intermittent sound
of a car speeding by, maybe coming home late
from a drunk, maybe someone from the cleaning class,
the guy who checks the furnace,
the one who opens up the building.

That pushing sound, of pressing on,
of having to get there,
is the human sound of wanting,
which is how we feed ourselves,
a sound we cannot notice in the day.

2015

Lipstick and Sunglasses

Do you start a museum to save such things?

I found them in the glove compartment,

I don't know what they were doing there.

They were instruments of allure,

attractants, and she left them to me.

I toss them in a trash bin

in front of a convenience store.

Goodbye lips of cherry red,

Goodbye eyes I loved

Admirable Moment

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

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

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

2008

Thanksgiving at Glacier National Park

It is said that area tribesmen don't drive the Highway to the Sun.

They are still sore at being cheated out of their mountains.

They weren't real estate lawyers, they thought the men from the government

were offering money for mining rights.

So they were selling the right to mine and haul away some precious rocks.

They were shocked to be evicted from their sacred lands.

2014

Bill and Helen Smith

Not many strangers found my folks' saloon on Lake Road
but we had many regulars who stopped by every day or so
for drinks and dinner.

Bill and Helen Smith were in their late fifties.

Helen was a homemaker. Bill, who was completely blind,
was a locksmith operating out of his garage.

I didn't know them well, but they were kind to an 11-year-old,
They loved my mother, and that was enough.

Bill and Helen stopped in for the Friday night fish fry.

I had breaded the perch earlier that day, and it was me
who set their plates on the table, and filled their cups of coffee,
and picked up the \$1 tip, a lot in those days.

Heading home, an oncoming car drove over the speedcaps on
Hwy 6 & 2

and smashed headfirst into the car Helen was driving
-- there were no seatbelts back then --

but Helen did not die, because Bill, in his final act as a man,
sensed the oncoming crash

and reached over to insert himself between Helen and the
wheel,

and he died that way, crushed, against her body.

The other car was driven by our coffee salesman,
who was drunk, and had to keep coming into our place
for years afterward, because he had years invested in the
territory,

and people liked Bill and Helen Smith,
but they liked Van Rooy Coffee, too.

Election

Don't take it personally.

The wind comes,

the leaves blow

down the street.

Take the Worst Thing

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

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

Ghost in the House

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

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

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

2011

Cycling

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

2004

Aerosol Tears

for today's
sad person
on the go

2011

The Baby Who Breastfed Forever

The first year no one objected but the thing never developed,
it sat on the breast with that dazed expression,
rolling its eyes and twitching its fingers.

Decades later, the mother is still waiting for that baby to take a
break.

Forget the college fund. Forget careers.

This blissed-out baby is going to suck and burp
that whey-smelly breath into the room
until the cows come home.

1985

Spring Green

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

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

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

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

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

2012

Did You Know?

Beavers' teeth never stop growing.

This is why they must be constantly gnawing something,

Trunks of trees, branches, sticks,

to keep their teeth from growing into their brain.

Do you ever think about the problems of beavers?

No, you only think of yourself.

2009

Losing a Daughter Is Like Being a Bee on the Moon

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

2011

Visiting the Farm in Otisville, Age Seven

I was struck by the animalness of everything,
the smell of the pigs, the grunting air,
the taste of uncured milk, the sweetness
of hay drying in the loft, the float of feathers
in the chicken coop after a dust-up.

I made special note of the horses' asses,
kind of amazing, with their tails switching the flies.

I was a city boy tiptoeing in the country,
and sometimes I was afraid of the cows at nightfall,
stepping on my feet and I led
their bony backsides back to the barn.

And I was afraid when my cousin Billy Springer,
seeing what a rube I was, stepped barefoot
into a fresh cow pie in the milking barn
and let the sauce rise up between his toes.

I was certain he would be consumed by worms,
if not immediately, then in a month or two,
him grinning because he knew he wouldn't.

In Response to a Tattoo of My Name and Jack Kerouac's Having Been Inscribed on the Forearm of a Friend

It is hard to know the right response to a thing.

Someone offers up their body for you

and what do you say, thanks pal?

Gratitude is impossible to the very cool

so you must make the awful choice,

to speak the ineffable truth of love

or to bury it with the pat of a shovel

in the yard of a friend who lives

just down the street.

You could rent an airplane of course

and squirt out a reply in brilliant vapor

but in a minute or two it melts away,

formless as a train of puffed rice,

you could hand out matchbooks

that say Your Patronage Is Appreciated

so every sour sniff of phosphorus

is also the sniff of thankfulness

that burns and leaves a divot in the skin

which lasts forever I am told

till the last white worm pats its tummy
in the grave and slides away

Springtime

When the floodwater rises
it drapes the twigs and stems
with the leaves and gunk stirred up.
Then when it recedes the muck
clings to the branches
in the shape of the water's drift.
The bushes seem populated with
puppets and dolls
with papier-maché blouses
and bunched up clothes.
And when the breeze comes through
it lifts up their skirts and they dance.

2002

The Child Who Slipped in the Bucket

The mother turned her back for just a second.

The three boys needed attention, too.

But it was enough time for little Greta, 14 months, to tumble in.

It was a five-gallon bucket, the kind Greta's father used as a backhoe operator,

with about eight inches of water in the bottom.

The level rose when the child tumbled in – too high to push out of.

Too deep to hear a burbled cry.

The paramedics took 20 minutes to arrive.

They were able to start her heart again, but could not undo the damage to the brain.

Everyone brought food, and hugs, and promises of prayers,

but the family struggled with journey they were setting out on.

They moved away because it was too hard to be around friends, who remembered Greta shouting out sounds, and joyfully stumbling about.

Everyone said she was the sweetest girl.

Now she can't close her eyes by herself, or use the toilet, or eat.

Years pass. I stop thinking about them.

But today I saw another child, at a nearby park, being pushed in a swing.

She reminded me of Greta, the aliveness I saw in her expression, the joy and confidence in the mother's face.

I thought of the child who slipped in the bucket, and the father, and three brothers, and pulled over.

2007

American Hearts

We are an emotional people
with fire in the belly for every sort of thing.
But in the end we lack depth
Because there is usually something we can do
to shut down the ache we start to feel.
We have options other peoples lack.
We can always enjoy a slice of cherry pie,
or shed a tear at movie's end,
or carpet bomb those who get on our nerves
until we feel right again.
There is always something we can do,
and this keeps the feelings from building
and wisdom from taking root,
so we are never ever longing for long.

.

Blame It On The Faultline

Hearing that the world would end on Easter Sunday
we rented a U-Haul van and drove out to the desert
to not be on the coastline when it slipped into the ocean.
We parked on a ridge and waited for the rumbling.
Around one o'clock we walked down a jagged line
to a 7 Eleven store on Hwy 69 in Twenty Nine Palms.
"I ain't heard a no earthquake," the proprietor said.
"But the San Andreas runs right up that ridge," he said,
pointing to where we had parked the Econoline.

1971

Million Dollar Smile

It's an attractive attribute, that catches the light
That pours from your eyes, the pleasure that melts mountains,
That blasts us into space, ricochets round the world
And explodes like nitroglycerin in the heart of all who know you.
But is it a sign of your genuineness? Or were you just born that way,
So that every time you flash the high beams, the mechanics combine
To freeze us in our paces? Is it something you do on purpose,
Knowing full well you have this power that you have never registered
With the local police precinct. Maybe the sight of thousands
Fallen to their knees to perform the sacred rite of seppuku
Has emboldened you to smile, smile, mowing down
The faint of heart for the pure joy of doing.

2015

Calving

The toe of the Northwestern Glacier is blue as a bubble gum snow-cone.

It is the way light refracts under the pressure of a million tons of freezing and grinding.

Still it looks stunningly wrong, as if someone has spray-painted a mountain.

The passengers on the excursion boat crowd around the railing, snapping and popping.

"It was much more spectacular last year," complains a woman holding her hat on.

The boat has quieted, we are to sit here until something "calves" and slips into the sea.

An Indian woman with a bright red bindi steps back into the cabin giggling: "It's too cold!"

The boat bobs gently, we all stare intently. Several minor fallings occur,

and the ice and snow crumbles into the cold fjord waters.

"That chip hasn't budged all summer," said the first mate, of a 10-story chunk

that is skronking away from the main. A knucklehead, standing by the bar

turns from the view just long enough to say, "Maybe if we used some dynamite," hyuk-hyuk,

and that is when the ice-pin chose to fall and down it slides with a cracking sound

as if the entire ocean had broken, 150 feet high, surrendering, like a fat lady

in a burning building letting go and tumbling into the big blue net, and the wave it made

rose higher than the boat and soon we were the chip rocking in its wake.

Everyone feels an enormous release and is enormously pleased.

We had seen a mountain fall into the sea and we needed to get on with our day.

"Dang," said Goofy, "I shouldna looked away." It doesn't bother anyone that each calf

pushed out of the glacier's haunch happens further up the hill.

So the captain starts puttering away, the only witness to our great good fortune

a harbor seal popped up behind us, like a minstrel smacking his whiskered lips.

And in an English actor's voice intones "They took to the sea, but the sea loved them not and spat them back upon the shore."

2010

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 the two 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?

2013

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.

CDEXIST ... 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.

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.

1980

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

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!

2010

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

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,

like white apostrophes, 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, I'm giving it to you.

2009

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

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 them?
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

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 remembered the meaning of the distant sound
of a motor being cranked.

2016

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.

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

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.

2016

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 long-ago
hunts.

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

it sits on their property, it 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

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

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 cosmic weight.

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, poisoned and reeling, on the ragged lawns of Freeport, Long Island?

2016

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,

a little bit dying but flamingly alive.

2016

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 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.

1989

**The Nighttime Tide On Lake Winnebegoshish Lists
Its Complaints**

Ish ...

Ish ...

Ish ...

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
slapping in the moonlight.
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
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 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 nymphs of grain
spatter the sides and gnawed limbs of warriors,
even the light in gin-soaked Yeoman Magruder's
bedroom down by Turtle Lake flicks on
as neighbors near and far attend the clash.

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

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

Landlord With A Cocaine Pronlem

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

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

Little Cora floated in an inner tube,
butt poking through,
and footy-paddled into the reeds.
When she emerged she was covered
with a hundred black leeches.
Her sisters screamed and would not help,
the mother and brother knelt and began to pick them off
but the young were so small
that when you picked them from a toenail
they squiggled under your fingernail.
Finally the two got to the bathing suit
and the brother began to cry and ran away
because up one sat the mother of the brood,
bigger around than a tricycle tire
so the mom made several forays
to fetch her out, she wished there
were a tool that could pluck monster leeches
from little girls' hineys
but there was only her fingers that could not get a grip
on the slithery thing
and when she finally grasped it around the middle and
tugged it out, making a schlocking sound
and Cora cried with all her might
and stood on the sand,
naked, suckered, and blinking
on the sand.

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 open-mouthed on the sand,

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

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

Without asking, they stripped his body with long knives, and peeled away his fat in lengthy strips. They rendered the fat, which screamed in the cauldron, and filtered it through cheesecloth.

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

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

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

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

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

they had no regrets.

2010

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.
For thine is the poem
Forever amen.

2006

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

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, 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

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 gimme gimme

2007

Pack Up Your Sorrows

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 shinguards or patio 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 sprang off the cycle and into the barbwire,

Like a spiderweb in the wind,

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

You had seen mountains climb down from the mountains,

You saw the seas see-saw, you 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, chrome wheel spinning in the morning air.

2014

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.

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 Stone's 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
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

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.

Where Birds Fare Well

Swallows 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,
Hérons in marshes,
Swans in canals and in fountains,
Skylarks sing into the sun,
Owls in cemeteries,
And cuckoos in the heads
of young
men.

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

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 open-mouthed.
The frantic look in the deer's eyes spelled terror, confusion, the
suggestion of reproach.
Deer and construction sites don't mesh, the deer 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 Lazarus Cheese, A Fromager's Tale

"We milk the sheep and stir the milk
and when it hardens place it in the cave.
The fungi are drawn to dark moisture,
and swarm over the great white wheels,
and cover them with a leathery skin.
But the cheese is so warm it radiates its sunshine
deep in the darkness and the fungi 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

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.

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

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 the better 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 paper into 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

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 *Koyaanisqatsi*, 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 cliché 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.

July 2, 1999

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

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 propelling 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

The fish in the bowl

It lets out a perfect bubble,
inside which is nested a single syllable,
which asks a simple question --
Why?

1994

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

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 a thread.

Actually, someone full-sized is inside, and he has to steer

Or he'll go in the ditch. He could hit his head.

Or worse, miss his appointment in a room 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

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 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

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

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

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.

Let's Get Lost in the Forest

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

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)

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."

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 either permission or impermission.

Buckle could mean to fasten together or to collapse.

To cleave could mean to stick together or to be split apart.

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 pansies, 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?

The Woman Who Would Not Melt

I always looked at young, prospective girlfriends and asked –
Will this one stand up to the rigors of time?

I noticed that the adults in our town were all melted candles.

I wanted a woman who would not melt.

And though the girls I knew looked terrific at the moment,

Firm and pliant, with a faraway look,

I expected that would 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 good places,

who would not go firm in the nice soft ones.

Then I met Rachel, who had the sturdy nature

I had been searching for.

She never lets me forget that when first we lay together,

I said to her, "You have a very pleasing density."

She scoffed. You scoff. Everyone likes a good scoff, am I right?

And she kept her part of the bargain.

A natural athlete with a sunny disposition.

It was I who did not hold up so well.

When we check into a hotel, the clerk will make a point

of asking my beautiful wife,

"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

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
to dab the shaken woman's sweater and jeans,
then led the two back to the bow
where the pitching was minimal.
She staggered back to see if I wanted to empty
the pack and she would hose it down.
Ashamed by her graciousness, I nodded.
She offered me gloves but I said no,
I was once a dad and waded through worse than this.
The boat continued to pitch and yaw
and the newlywed woman returned,
boyfriendless, to stare sullenly out the window.
But when we ducked back into the inlet,
away from the raging sea, she rose and rejoined him
at the gangplank, where they kissed and smiled,
but 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 woman 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,
"You're going to be just fine."

Great Stuff

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.

2011

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.

Little Bighorn

I take my 4-year-old 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! '

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.

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'

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 Saturday 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. The 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.”

At The Bulkhead

We asked the bus 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.

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.

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 cranebill 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.

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

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

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.

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 scalding 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.

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

After 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 every day.
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

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

2011

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 upside-down 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.

It 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 roused 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 faces gray from jet exhaust -- and I want to salute.

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 away.
I held my hand over my eyes against the afternoon sun,
that shone on the turning waters like diamonds.

2013

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

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

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

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 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.

Coffeeshouses 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, Albrecht 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 stored 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 crueller 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
are always browsing at our heels,
the beauty of the universe trapped in a puddle of oil
on a rainy stretch of road.

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.

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 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 steering 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.

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

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

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.

I dial the mental health 800 number

Only 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 very 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 nose-thingie, 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 answered 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."

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.

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 bubbling troughs of cookie dough vanilla and chocolate
mint
disappearing into those 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.

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.

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 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?"

"Shut up," my brother said.

The New Model Francis

I greet the birds in the spirit
of lovingkindness.

I expect them to perch on my finger
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, you
accepted the gift.

Oh, the sweating tension we live out our lives in,

Framed by this constant hissing sound.

Conformance To Specs

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.

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.

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?

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 please 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.

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 Chichicastenango 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 a sinner, he sobbed.

No forgiveness, no restitution. I have failed at everything.

Come, 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

Shakespeare in Love

My last tumor panic, 1998.

It was the night before Valentines Day and Rachel and I went out for a rare dinner and movie date. Money was a bit scarce. I had just bought a print for us, by an artist friend, of two birch trees gently intertwining. It cost \$300, but I was in love. Wouldn't you know, I got an overdraft notice from the bank that very afternoon.

We choose an Indian restaurant in Minneapolis, figuring not many people will think of celebrating Valentine's Day Indian style. When the waiter, named Dinesh, stiffly presents us with our menus and leaves, Rachel whispers that he doesn't seem to have much of a sense of humor. But I hold out for him. "He's all right," I say.

We order wine, my first drink since suffering a "cerebral event," a flaming thrombosis, two weeks earlier. What a difference it is, to be wearing clothes and drinking generic merlot in a nice restaurant, compared to that hospital robe and hospital bed.

We order our dinner, telling Dinesh to cook our food no spicier than mild-to-medium. "We are from St. Paul," I say slowly. No reaction.

So I tell Rachel her about my poetry reading earlier that morning. The downtown mall thought a reading about love would spur sales. When it was my time to read, people were passing before me like traffic at a major intersection. The sound system was loud and hollow. But this was what I told the shoppers:

Rachel listens to my monologue with eyes glistening. Dinesh brings our dinner, which is spectacular -- a dozen little dishes and sauces and chutneys and breads. I continue with my speech at the mall:

"The reason poets don't write love poems," I said, "is that they love their muses more -- their imaginations. It's one reason poetry seems flat today. It's not about love for others. It's not a gift we give readers. It's like masturbation -- fun, but unromantic.

"I have a special insight into this issue because I found out two weeks ago that I have a brain tumor. Inoperable!

"So I fret. What if I lose my IQ? Or my sense of humor? What if I lose my muse?

"And I'm asking myself, Which is more important to me, my muse or my wife? And the answer is -- my wife. Poetry only wants you at the top of your game, when all your faculties are clicking in perfect synch. But even if I come out of the operation washed up as a poet, Rachel will still love me."

I'm telling Rachel all this over tandoori chicken and naan. I'm very pleased with my public proclamation. She just shakes her head.

"You're so full of it," she says. "If you love me more than your writing, why do you write all the time?"

I nod, and think about all the times I head upstairs to clatter on the computer rather than climb into bed with her.

"But," I say. "If I come out of the hospital a vegetable, you'll still love me, right? Whereas I'll probably never hear from my muse again."

"You're going to be OK, you know," she says.

"Sure. But if worse comes to worse, you have power of attorney. If I'm really bad you can pull the plug on me. If I'm just pretty bad, you can put me in a home. All I want is that you come visit me sometimes. I mean, I would want you to have a life, maybe get married again."

For a moment there is silence, as I push the basmati rice with a fork.

"You know," Rachel says, "if you vegged out, you could still live at home. Even if, worst case, I began dating again, there's no reason we couldn't still be together."

"Then it's settled," I say. I ask Dinesh for the bill. He gives it to me, and I give it to Rachel. "Handle this, dear," I say. Dinesh cracks up. "See," I tell Rachel, "I told you he had a sense of humor."

After dinner we go to a movie -- Shakespeare in Love. Rachel and I have a ball watching it, whispering excitedly, shoulder to shoulder, giggling.

A man sitting in front of me turns around not once, but twice, to insist we put a cap on it. I spin him back around with a twirl of my finger:

"Just enjoy the movie," I said to him, as if I was doing him a favor, as if it wasn't his fault he couldn't recognize true love -- "please."

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.

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! 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."

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.

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.

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?

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."

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."

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

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

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.

Colossuses

I was brought to the site where my monument
was under construction.

It was a 150-foot statue of me, my feet set apart,
With an enormous arrow in one hand.

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 certain ships passing through
might scrape my crotch.

You know, tall ships.

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.

I indicated to the architect-engineer that I was starting
to regret hiring a monument man right out of school.

I stared around the harbor. None of the other colossuses
Had the problem I was having.

I sat on the wharf, feeling punked by all the other colossuses.
Nothing ever works out for me.

The Plaque at Meeker Island

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 ... you want fame and instant recognizability ...

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 soldier 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 obviously 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 of 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 bunny-face
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.

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?

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 its face.

I could tell Lucy was dubious about the whole enterprise.

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

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

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

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

"I hate my legs," she said.

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 – sun-drenched 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?

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.

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 comforter
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.

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?

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

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

It had hardly rained all summer.

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

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

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

We ran through the house
lowering windows.

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

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.

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

1983

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."

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.

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.

A 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 shank-

Bone 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 clammers 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 hilarious misunderstandings,
the bumpy journeys we've all been sent out on,
Without maps or briefings,
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 must live in Minnesota
and have taken a holy vow,
for 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.

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 thing.

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 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 liked 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.

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 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,

They were the passports we carried into life,

They laminated 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

i.

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

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.

1976

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 fulfilling,
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, in-
comprehensible
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.

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 Vieques
reportedly the shiniest of the kind in the world.
But tonight, which is St. Patrick's Night,
the moon is too bright for the full effect.
So Rachel heaves herself over the edge
and slides into water said to be populated
by bull sharks and hammerheads.
But she transforms into a flashing angel
lighting up the water around her,
treading water like an aquatic butterfly.
That's my bioluminescent woman
down there, an amazement only
to those who do not know her

Rx for Happiness

Admire your daylilies dailily.

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.

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.

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.

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 and cotton, 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. "Put it with the rest," I will say, pointing to the pile.

But when I look out the window all I see are grackles stealing the sunflower seed

and behind them, the garbage truck backing up,
going beep ... beep ...

2013

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.

2012

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.

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.

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 hush of God says
'You can't quit,
you're fired.'

1975

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.

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

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.

Does it leave you all in a moment,
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 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.

"He knew what he was doing," people'd 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.

The Howling

Bruce Cockburn intones the song “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.

the fierceness of their love.

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, teary-eyed,
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 loaf 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 karst 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
wagging behind them.
“Tell me more about myself, tell me more!”
And they're not working for you any more.
You say everyone needs encouragement
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
high above you, 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 downstairs,
Graceful and delicate, walking on air.
Halfway to womanhood, working, and college,
Think of the expertise, think of the knowledge!
Think of your doddering, slobbering father
Who always thought you could walk on water.
Nevertheless, here you are, here am I.
Who could be prouder, who makes me cry?
I would do anything you ask me to,
Quack like an elephant, shout like the dew,
Save you from earthquake and mudslide and viper,
Save you from having to launder a diaper.
Save you from heartache and meanness and strife

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

Second Law of Thermodynamics

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.

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?

I AM GOYA, tonight at Sidhe Brewery

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

A 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!

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.

Surprising Discovery

It's only after studious examination
of the life habits of insects
under a magnifying glass,
that you realize how common it is
for them to burst into flame.

Tenting on the Poudre River Four And a Half Hours Before Sunup

Not only are you too old for this now,
You always were.
Your spinal cord, so soft and riddled with nerves,
does not want to spend another night
on sharp pebbles.
Each stone pricks through the tarp
like a comet out of its loop,
like an island on a map
Of an undiscovered sea.
Roll onto one shoulder
and feel the volcano
Poking into your deltoid.
Roll back on your back and there,
Pressed against the rib protecting
your gall bladder and spleen
Is the prick of Gibraltar,
a penknife point whose top
priority in life is
to get to know you better.

2011

Roger That

That isn't his last name --
I forget his last name.
As a teenager he was in our house
every night all raggedy and drunk
and he sidled up to me
working at my desk, paused
about thirty seconds,
until I really knew he was there,
and Roger asked,
Daniele's dad, can I bum a cigarette?

A few years later, drunk
beyond belief, he tried boarding
a moving coal train and slipped
and the wheels lopped both his legs off.

I saw him the other day
in a wheelchair in front of the courthouse
carrying a sign that said
Adolf Hitler was the most
musunderstood man in history!

I said, "Roger, do you really believe that?"
He said, "Well, I don't agree
with every single one of his policies,
Mister Finley, but being Nazi makes me feel --
I don't know -- like somebody."

"I get that," I said.

"Besides," he said, tipping his cap,
"I like fucking with people."

2007

What To Get From E. E. Cummings

Not the capitalization, I hope.

The problem with great originals
is that you want to be original too –
and the way they make your heart speed up
and your lip bleed say copy this,
only just change it a little bit.

If you want to copy something
copy the spirit that allowed him
to locate music in a world blown apart,
the eye for evil that never looked away,
copy the perfectly alive blossom of bliss
that sang through the suffering
like a green throaty bird

Why Minors Today Are So Delinquent

a poem about d. a. levy, the great rebel poet of Cleveland
(1942-1968)

Judge asks levy how he's going to pay his \$200 fine

for contributing to the delinquency of minors.

I don't know, your honor, I don't make much writing poems.

How much do you charge per poem? the judge asked.

Oh, maybe thirty cents apiece, levy answered.

You should charge more, the judge said.

Stethoscope Hookah

It made sense in theory because the rubber piping
that you snip from the instrument
is reminiscent of the puffing hoses of a hookah
except that you can buy a bubble-pipe
at any head shop for twenty bucks
whereas my wife's stethoscope cost her
four hundred dollars and you do not have
to go to the emergency room afterward
with black toxic smoke inhalation.

Correction

Whoever came up with the phrase
barrelful of monkeys
cannot have had to deal personally
with the hair-tearing,
dung-flinging chaos
of having a barrel opened
while you are having people over.
Sure, it's "fun" ...

The Light

I've 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 as 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.

1976

Prayer for Money

To the extent that it is educational to suffer,
And there are lessons You evidently want us to learn,
OK Boss, we get it.
If we ever sneered from the grace of our own comfort
That others weren't trying hard enough,
Or did not deserve better than they got --
Forgive us.
We are reduced in our knuckle-biting self-concern
To being grateful that those people over there are the ones
hurting
And not us here.
You who never pass up an opportunity to remind us
That you are commander of the tides, wash something
This way.
Implant a steel spine of tolerance in us,
And confidence that one of us will write a check one day
And get things moving.
Call halt to this painful experiment in learning.
Send rain by the oceanload, rinse away
Our fear.

Plan

I know what I will do.

I will drive to the wilderness,
and I will pitch my tent and wait.

I am prepared to wait there as long as I have to.

And when a tree within earshot has had enough
and is ready to fall to the forest floor,

I will be on hand to evaluate the sound it makes,
and report back to you.

1989

When I Come Out of the Mountains

When I come out of the mountains I will come looking for you.
When I come out of the mountains wearing a cloak of fine linen..
When I come out of the mountains the demons will part for me.
When I come out of the mountains I will bring every kind of
strong medicine.
When I come out of the mountains the sun will be blazing.
When I come out of the mountains the jays will loop from tree
to
tree.
When I come out of the mountains I will come striding up your
path.
When I come out of the mountains I will rap on your door.
When I come out of the mountains I will take you in my arms
And carry you back to the mountans forever.

Plan

I know what I will do.

I will drive to the wilderness,
and I will pitch my tent and wait.

I am prepared to wait there as long as I have to.

And when a tree within earshot has had enough
and is ready to fall to the forest floor,

I will be on hand to evaluate the sound it makes,
and report back to you.

1989



Kraken Press