

THE PROBLEM OF CONSCIOUSNESS



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Surprise Us

We worry what will take us out.

A successful death would come as a surprise,

A bus suddenly swacking us in the face

or a bomb blast painting an X-ray on the wall.

Lightning tapping us on the shoulder.

Anything sudden is okay.

What we want to avoid are the prolonged diseases,

the slicing off of limbs, the missing breath,

the body's steady retreat from functionality.

We don't want to die when we feel abandoned

or at a point of failure in our lives.

That would not be 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.

Collossus

I was brought to the site where my monument
was under construction.

Tomorrow was its official opening.

It was a 150-foot statue of me, my feet set apart.

I held an enormous arrow in one hand
and a pot of something -- gold? -- in the other.

My head was held back, and the echo of heady laughter
piped out of my enormous cast iron mouth.

Everything met my specifications, except for one thing --
my groin area was only about 65 feet above water.

This meant that larger ships passing through
might come uncomfortably close to scraping my crotch.

I pointed this out to the architect-engineer, who protested
that construction was already over budget,

and he wasn't sure what I was asking --

that I raise the platform so my crotch was higher,

or perhaps I wanted to dynamite the most vulnerable area
as a precaution against the kind of accident I envisioned.

What a choice. I indicated to the architect-engineer
that I was starting

to regret hiring a monument man right out of school,

but money was a factor, and i thought I might get lucky.
I stared around the harbor. None of the other collossuses
seemed to be having the problem I was having.
I sat on the wharf, feeling punked by all the collossuses
whose engineers had foreseen this eventuality.
Nothing ever works out for me.

The Breath

It was the winter of 1980. I took a late night train from New Haven to the city. I arrived 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 some 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 major land mammal.

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 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 we 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.

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.

You Should Have Seen Me, Wislawa Szymborska

The reading honoring you went OK,
but in the last three lines I lost a word.
I was reciting from memory and suddenly hit a wall.
The poem I memorized was no longer available.

I wasn't 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
Earlier that morning, driving down to Red Wing,
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 suppose I looked like a maniac, but you smiled lovingly,

one stranger to another,
and kept going

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 bit of height to the layer.

Who's going to whip out a tape and measure the difference,

especially with the blow blowing alongside the highway, the tape twisting and lengthening in the wind?

Spring Green

Spring green is not like regular green,
it seems shot through with shafts of gold,
that waver in the still-angular sun.

It is not sturdy or worried about rain,
or worried about anything.

The grass is like a school of fish
that shifts with every shifting breeze.

It is profligate and optimistic,
go ahead and step on our bodies,
they say, you cannot crush us all.

The ghosts of winter have been vacuumed away
and little heads now
lift their heads in song.

At The Bulkhead

We asked the driver, just across from us,
if he ever thought about the danger
of all those miles rolled up,
the sleepy eyes, the open road,
the oncoming cars.
He laughed and said,
"No, I'm at peace with all that,"
and adjusted his visor.
And you and I looked at one another,
wishing we had not asked.

Overconfident Brain Surgeon

Doctor Ladida sat cross-legged on the rug,
his hands roving across my skull.

"This brain is young, it must continue to create.

I propose we go in at your earliest convenience," he said.

"I will cut out the tumor and you will live
a remarkable life!"

"The hell you will," I said, and shot out of the room.

Sneeze

You want it to happen, you don't want
to be teased by the thing --
almost there, almost there, nearly there,
oh my god it's gone,
like a roller coaster rolling back to the launch.
But when it comes 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,
executing pedestrians, pulling the pins from grenades,
uttering the unutterable to the loved and unloved,
and afterward, mopping up the spray,
your sanity returned to you,
what can you say to the scattered fallen,
and how can they respond except
Bless you.

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 a live woman.

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.

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.

This was 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.

Overheard At The Park

"I hate that goddamn sun.

You can't see the traffic head right at you
and look what it's done to my freckles!"

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.

Paradox

you cannot care less
out of carelessness.
To care less you must intend
to care less, which
is itself a kind of caring.
You have to care a lot
to care less. You must
take care to care less.
If you don't happen to care
I could not care less.

Freshly Crucified Lawyer

I know you're not the man in charge,
but I'm guessing you know who is in charge,
and in addition, you just seem like a guy I can trust

Me, I see a lot of hard cases myself
so it's refreshing for me to bump into someone
I know from the get-go I can do business with.

That's just another reason I hate to bother you.
But believe me, my friend, you will kick yourself
if you don't take up my case with the higher-ups.

Because I have learned from long experience
That if you delay too long on this kind of opportunity,
everybody looks bad.

There Are Bargains If You Know Where To Look

Health insurance for a dollar a week

Grow your penis to remarkable length

Powerball reaches the \$430 million mark

The price of gas is coming down

Thanks to our men and women in uniform

Lose weight the five grapefruits a day way

Own your own home, apart from the 30-year mortgage

The answer in a shaky economy – is gold

Lovely Thunder

How beautiful the grinding above us is,
the slowness of each approach,
shoulder brushing against shoulder,
the moans of cattle,
the sound of empty barges let loose
down the river, thick steel against steel,
hollowly banging, the notes that are sounded,
each one different and in its own rhythm
but of the same threatening song.

Poetry Is Supposed to Be Miserable

We did not realize we believed that
but for 40 years we did.

In our youth we wrote about heartache and heartbreak
and the soul-shuddering sadness of ourselves.

When I could have been loving you all this while
We could have encouraged more singing

Spread a banquet for us on the grass
with cake and wine and other good things

Now we hope to make amends,
Blow balloon animals up for the kids

Sing happy birthday to every fair child
Let grandma go on about the olden days

We bless the oxygen we cycle between us
We write an epic poem about our tennies.

Let's stick chewing gum under the table!

Let's make the toads pea brown in our hands!

My Conversation With Thad

This is how people should talk to each other,
laying it all out for one another,
a timeline of catastrophes and failures,
a data dump of the facts we acknowledge
and our part in each,
the challenges that loom ahead --
getting it all off our chest,
like saying, I'm not here
to piss all over you, Thad,
I'm telling the god's honest truth.

My Body Is Drifting Through Space

Remember the song "My Body" in Hair?

How in love with the body they were,
stripping it bare for strangers in the audience to see.

Oh, my God your skin is soft I love your face --

How dared they try to end this beauty?

And why don't we sing "My Body" anymore?

Exalted

There is a used auto parts concern
on Lyndale Avenue in north Minneapolis
with a head-turning advertising ploy
that can only be seen driving by on I-94 --
a steel pole, and perched atop,
a junked convertible with a bearded figure waving in it.
It seems to be a store mannequin blonde in a wig
exposed year-round to the snow and the rain
but in recent years there has been an addition --
a placard saying "Psalms 46:10."
It worked because as soon as I got home
I looked up the passage:
"Be still, and know that I am God;
I will be exalted among the nations,
I will be exalted in the earth."
Because that was no blonde raised high on a pole
by the Dowling Avenue exit.
That was the lord of lords, reviewing his domain.

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 standing with wet foot in the water."

I love the name. It contains *tremble*, *temple*, *trample*
and *tremolo*.

When I was young I visited Valerie at her farm
in Trempealeau County,

the rolling hills that sheep tumbled down, the hills
that tipped over tractors.

Doreen and my brother Brian threw frisbee in the corn,
and what was noteworthy was that Doreen 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 Doreen in Trempealeau," he said.

"I never felt so forgiven or so loved."

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.

When You Love Someone

It hurts a little.

You struggle to breathe,
you see them, you see
the things that you don't have,
they seem so perfect to you.

You are like the child
outside the screen door
hoping they can come out to play.
Just to see them with your eyes.

It doesn't last.

We know too much about one another.
In that moment you love them more
than their own parents,
who brought them into the world,
could do.

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.

Why I Favor Friends Who Are Flawed

It's hard to get close to the likable.

The economics of affection prevent it.

Those for whom relationships come easily

soon find that they are booked up

and though they retain their considerable appeal

the fact is they have closed up shop.

They have given away so many chunks

there is no meat left to distribute.

This is not to say there aren't wonderful people

who keep giving and giving, you know the type.

I am convinced these people have mastered themselves

and keep beaming and blessing despite voices

telling them to run screaming from the room.

No, it is the less lovable who are actually more lovable,

for they present a greater valence for love,

precisely because no one else wants them.

Their hearts are intact and their inexperience with love

makes them vulnerable to your interest in them.

And while other people wonder

what you see in this person,

You have reason to be pleased with your choice.

They may be gruesome but they belong to you.

The Motorist

In 1871 the first dog was allowed to ride
in a gasoline-powered automobile,
Ajax, an Alsatian hound, owned by Dr. J.W. Carhart,
a minister of the Methodist Episcopal Church
of Racine, Wisconsin,
and inventor of the steam wagon that he called The Spark.
Ajax did not understand he was the first dog
to exceed a ground speed of 25 miles per hour
but the record is his nonetheless.
No dog had traveled faster unless it was picked up
by a tornado or chased off a cliff.
There were no windows on the vehicle,
The master steered it using a lever,
but Ajax sat on the edge of the buckboard,
pink tongue hanging off to one side,
quite pleased to be included.

Responding To Roger

"In short, is there any comfort for you in words that speak of God?"

I wound up stripping God down to bare essentials.
"He" accompanies us through life,
he wishes us well,
but we are on our own.

Interesting fun coincidences keep happening
that prevent us from feeling utterly alone,
but I'll be damned if I can make sense out of them.
These are the WTF moments, or poems, or jokes.

I backed a dumptruck full of scripture into the river,
and it was sad to see all those bearded bald guys
sink into the bubbles.

Everything good comes as a surprise.
We live and die by our consciousness and our love.

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 on the door again
when the first knock went
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 splatters
every face!

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 moment to sing,

then the rolled-up newspaper.

O how we howl when the pie has been eaten,

when we still have the moon.

