



# The Way Of Men

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## Contents

In The Inflated Backyard Swimming Pool .....	4
Accident .....	5
At the Intersection of Hamline and St. Clair .....	6
The Bioluminescent Woman .....	7
Why Do Our Friends Love Us? .....	8
The Rapture.....	9
Living With Someone Who Lives In The Now .....	10
A Hand Is Like a Flower .....	11
It's Over .....	12
To A Stranger .....	13
Why I Favor Friends That Are Flawed .....	15
Tiny.....	17
While You Are In Alaska .....	18
Summation.....	19
Advantages of Turning Sixty-Four .....	20
To Understand A Woman .....	21
The Woman at the Folies-Bergère .....	22
Palos Verdes.....	23
The Way Of Men .....	24
The Bluffs Overlooking The Sea .....	25
Valentine .....	26
Shakespeare in Love.....	27
Love Poem for a Woman .....	30
Living Without Friends .....	31

Hand On Knee .....	32
Hand .....	33
The Woman On Level 5-North .....	34
Let's Get Lost in the Forest .....	36
I Fall In Love Too Easily.....	37
When You Love Someone .....	38
Song.....	39
Stubbornness .....	40
Phone Call .....	41
Under The Wonderful .....	46
Every Song Is An Act Of Love .....	47

## In The Inflated Backyard Swimming Pool

Her name was Karen.

She was five and I was six.

She was wearing a little girl's swimsuit,  
with a ruffled bottom.

She knelt beside me and I studied  
her honey-tan legs,  
her little butt resting on her heels,  
the pretty wrinkle-lines on her knees,  
so different from my Irish skin.

And she smiled at me

With her beautiful baby teeth,  
bright daggers of pearl.

I understood then why boys wanted to  
affiliate with girls,  
despite the fact they were girls --  
it was because of their honey-tanned legs,  
and the pearly daggers of their teeth

## 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.

## 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.

## 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

## Why Do Our Friends Love Us?

Why do friends love us while we hate our guts?

How do they overlook the disturbances we fix on?

The patterns and indulgences, the sickening repetitions --

Is it because we spend all our time in here, with *that* --

And we exhaust ourselves and the relationship is so tense.

Maybe we need to back off a bit, take a break from ourselves,

Until we are superficial but loving with ourselves

the way our friends are, and we see us the way they do,

from somewhat of a distance as forgivable things

that they are not all bound up with.

2008



## 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.

## 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.

## 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.

## 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.

## 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.

## 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



## 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.

## 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.

## Summation

I know that you loved me  
though the rails clacked  
and the TV raged  
because I was no good in the way  
you would want good done  
because I was the one  
Particularly, or perhaps  
it was the light of late afternoon  
that rolled and stretched  
like a davenport dream –  
my hand on your hipbone,  
like a witness taking an oath

## 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.

## 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.

## **The Woman at the Folies-Bergère**

I thought many thoughts.

And I never said a word.

I told you a thousand silent things

But I never said a word.

Others opened their hearts to you

But I never said a word.

The look in your eyes shouted yes to me

And I never said a word.

I have thought about you every day

But I never said a word.

1977

## 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.

## 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.



## 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.

## 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

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*."

## 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

## 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.

## 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.



## 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.

## 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

## 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!

## 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

## 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.

## Song

Could be I will come into a prize  
And suddenly feel legit  
Could be the sun got in my eyes  
And I'll get over it  
It's possible for love to return  
The famous kiss, the same embrace  
The loving people that we were  
Will come back 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 my love what may

2009

## Stubbornness

is a kind of beauty in some, when you see fire  
in the face that would burn up the world,  
which is the price it pays for having you in it  
and it is unreasonable and it is doomed, still you  
cannot look away from the power of that longing,  
it is you throwing everything you have at the world,  
your determination against all the pain it promises,  
kicking and willful like a young colt in spring

2011



## Phone Call

I didn't want to make the call. I was scared, scared, scared of the whole thing. But her family pressed me into making it.

I felt like an imposter. I hadn't seen her in 50 years.

The sister, Elizabeth, said:

"But it would mean so much to her."

"You too were a fairy tale couple."

"It will free her up to die."

And so I sat in my cubicle, waiting for her sister to patch the call to me.

Around 12:15 the call came.

Elizabeth spoke. "Mike, I'm putting you on speaker. Just start talking."

I heard erratic breathing on the other end. Ha ... ha ... ha ... Only then did I realize she couldn't talk -- I had to do all this on my own!

What if I blocked? What if words failed me?

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. Was it excitement or just shortness of breath?

I told Liz, I said, I haven't even seen you since 1968. That's 50 years, dear. After 50 years, I wasn't sure what I would say to you ...

A moment of silence as I summoned something to say. Then it began to come back.

I remembered the first time I saw you. I was 14, you 16. It was in the Plato's living room. A handful of high school Thespians were there drinking Cokes. Then suddenly you were sitting at the upright, banging out the chords to 'Bringing in the Sheaves.'

You were such a trip, Julie -- your giant head of honey brown hair, like a Pre-Raphaelite woman in a tree, and your grin, so full of joy and crazy power -- and braces -- making fun of the hymn while also doing it justice.

We shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves. Remember that, Julie?

I don't know why I was even in that room. I was just the neighbor boy, dropping by. But I was SO impressed!

Julie was breathing quickly though her nose now. I heard it as laughing.

My co-worker in the next cube -- this is at Thomson Reuters in Eagan -- now realizing I was on a very personal call, got up and stole away. You and I were alone now.

I remember starting high school and finding you in my classes. I thought you were a woman, so it was weird to learn you were just a girl -- statistically.

And from that first day you saw something in me -- I do not know what -- and began to cultivate me. Flattering me. Telling me how wonderful I was! You liked me, right out of the box.

That was something for me -- 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. We listened to the Fugs and Beatles on your

turntable. You loved to gossip about teachers and classmates, and I because you did, 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, Dante, Elizabeth Barrett Browning. All I knew was adventure novelists like Twain and Dickens and Jules Verne. 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.

I just wanted a regular girlfriend, not Sarah Bernhardt. A cutie, not a beauty. I was afraid of your grandness.

One night, at your house, you dared me to kiss you, with your hands on your hips. And I did – out on the lawn, under a tall Scotch pine. In one minute I morphed boy to trouble.

I ran home under the stars, up the Park Avenue hill and then down again, nonstop.

When I turned 16, my family moved one town away, and I acquired a car, a green Buick Special. 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!

We would jump out of the car in the dark, aggressively naked, and mauled each other on the trunk. I remember your smell. I loved your smell. I barked at the moon.

Then we went away to different colleges. I hitchhiked a hundred miles once to see you in Ashtabula, and your roommates cleared out so we could be naked together for an afternoon and

a night. You were a woman now, and I was this close to being a man.

And in the morning I stuck out my thumb, and I never saw you again. 1969.

I know you got a masters in Italian Renaissance literature. You moved to Boston. You married, and divorced. I learned you became a psychiatric nurse, tending to people without money. I learned you could reach people when no one else could. The reason – because you yourself were seriously bipolar.

I learned you switched sides and married a woman you loved, and you had a daughter together, who became a doctor.

We talked on the phone once, before you got sick. You helped me think through my daughter's suicide. You remained convinced of my specialness, after all that had happened. You were so wise and so kind to this boy who deserted you.

You wanted to get together but I held back. We started out as a fairy tale couple. I didn't want you to see how ordinary I had become. I had gained weight. I hadn't written any bestsellers. Your small town prince got swallowed up by the world.

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 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 -- with thanks in my heart and tears in my eyes.

I hung the receiver up. Four days later her brain tumor swept her away.

This is #17 to #2 - signing off.

2017

## 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

## 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

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