

Morning Meditation

If you want more,
Just say so
He says to a boss
In the physical image
Of his mother, a coworker perceived
As his envious older brother,
A trio of women resembling
In malignity of spirit his older sisters

Before heading, through the years,
To Celine. That party where
He nuzzled her thin neck
And rested his hand on her hip
And whispered, "Room 419. Come kiss
Me goodnight. He'll never know."

October 2002

Wall

Suppose I did nothing?
Suppose I came home
And fell onto my bed?
No books to read,
No words to write,
No meditation practice
To maintain,
No friends to call.

Just this fatigue
Calling to me,
Saying, "Lie down,
Rest your head.
It will all over soon."

May 2003

Verna

I told her I knew
What it is to drink
At home
Alone

And when that doesn't suffice,
To tear out to the bars looking for the thing
You cannot find

And make a scene and get eighty-sixed.

The thing is, I told her I would be thinking of her

While I was away

October 3, 2002

Song of Smallness

The novel went unpublished,
The money just not there for such a
“Commendable but lengthy” work.

So the small press publisher said,
Did I tell you I saw the chap
Just last night, giving a reading
Of his own impoverished prose?

Did I tell you too he had in tow
A blond one, she pushing twenty to
His fat fifty? In his starring role,
he brushed me aside when I approached.

I am speaking to you from my cubicle,
Over here, second down on the right.
Scared for my job in a crummy economy
I generally am,

But now an attitude sharp and impaling
That I should have to be here at all.

All I want is for you to know.
Tell me it isn't too much to ask.

June 2003

Abroad

Call it depression. Call it fear.
At the last minute I almost walked
Off the boarding line, but the thought
Of my suitcase abandoned
In the skies was enough to keep me in place.

So now I'm here, in a town called Estoril,
Sitting on a bench eating bleu cheese and salami
And a handful of almonds.
There's a fountain nearby spouting
Sprays of water and pathways through
The greenest lawn you'll ever see
And palm trees to add to the picture,
And beyond all that
A giant casino waiting to cash me out.

I've been feeling sort of low. It's one thing
If people back home are missing you.
It's another if no one cares. With thoughts like that,
I began to meditate, my mind turning
To when Beloved and I were in the marriage way.
That night I drove back from the movie theater
With my daughter Katie and her friend Patrice,
And how, between the parked car and the house
I took it upon myself to hide.
But eight-year-old Patrice wasn't having it.
"We don't care where you are,"
She flat out said, her words zipping like arrows in the dark.

The thing about a meditation is that you might begin
In the pit of shame and intense regret, but if you hang in
Long enough it will pull you onto the path of love.
A man has a right to make a lie give way to truth
And then tell you what it is that he has done
To achieve this result. He has that right.

October 2002

Train

I was young and stupid and focused
With the energy the drugs supplied,
And told her of a wondrous site,
A childhood haunt,
A tunnel where the might of America
Once roared along a straightaway,
And how it was the day
When Richie Valens died
And what it was to have a ferocious friend
Named Vinnie Maldonado
And prepubescent love stirring in my loins
As we waited with ballast
To bash the oncoming freight.

She had things to share as well,
How she slept with an older man
Drowning in despair and how,
in an open field, she made love
To a deuce of strangers.

By this time we were naked
In her apartment,
The George Washington Bridge
Present to our sight.
From far below a train whistle blew
And I swore, on my heart's own blood,
To follow when I could.

November 2002

The Window

Early morning
Slats of blinds

From the broken window
A view of this:

In a construction site
The bright white of his shirt
He with his long legs
Sheathed in denim

Jaunty power
On the move
The focal point
A ruined dormitory

Accommodating an ancient man
Long enough for him
To seize upon the word *dormir*.
Saying:

Many are they who have slept here.
Many are they who have gone on.
Many are they who walk the earth
In boots of strength,

Hammer in hand
Hard hat on head
Seeking the outhouse
For relief.

August 2003

The Siren

The siren wails, intent
On its own way.

Blood on the marigolds,
Burnt women shrieking,
Sneakers melted on their feet.

Everywhere tall buildings
Quivering in their own fear.

In a windowless space,
Amid the hissing pipes,
We sing a song
Of longing for eternal sleep.

August 2003

The Oiseau

My oiseau lives in a high rise
As certain oiseaux do,

And works on her premises,
As some oiseaux are also known to.

A feeling of loneliness
has brought me to her,

Some sense of not being seen or heard,
Of people moving away.

This need to talk. Somewhere I read
Those who meditate come to that place.

I am at her door right now, with check in hand,
Hoping soon the conversation will begin.

August 2003

The Day at Hand

Men were in pursuit, the caller whispered,
Firing their guns into the air.
It was the street fair, he surmised.
Socks, once so cheap, had gone up in price.

He had his own Ninety-five theses, and really,
They were just one. God, why did you give me
Ambition that exceeds my grasp and sisters who
Beat me every last time?

In the cluttered cafe sat men wrapped in the silence
Of old sorrow. Outside a Zamboni
Had fled the ice to perform figure eights
On streets supplied with filth.

Nearby a man with pockets turned out
Bird-dogged another with the unspoken threat
Of knifepoint intimacy in the night
While the river watched with the fire that it hides.

June 2003

Terror

No planes, no foreign lands.
Only a rental car and the terra
Firma of the USA.
The flags.
Every home and shop
Seemed to have one.
Frantic I became for those
That didn't, like a man
Gasping for air.

Years before, Beloved and I
Drove north with the windows
Down when the AC gave out,
Hoping, mile by mile,
To leave the heat behind.
My thoughts were
Of my mother
Back in New York City.
She had moved into
My childhood room,
And there I had left her
With the fan on high.

How too, on that earlier trip,
I saw a waitress
In a French Canadian restaurant,
Angry and servile at the same time,
As if she were my mother
At a younger age.
Later, driving into the Canadian sunset,
I imagined a choir singing "In the Garden"
And began to cry. From a roadside phone
I called, fearing she was gone.
On that same trip Beloved
Went down to eighty pounds and danced
On a narrow ledge over a steep and rocky drop.
A trip where things began to change,
With understanding somewhere in the distance.

October 2002

Telling You

If a word could mean something
And gather strength, like
The hurt now gripping me,

Then I would add others
And hurl them
That you might know

This pain you gave yourself
The power to assign to me.
I would tell you what withdrawal

Means, your premises vacated
Before my arrival could be arranged.
I would tell you too the sound

Of silence a phone can make.
Only then would I share with you
The dream from long ago,

The robed woman who stepped
From the forest, seeking to ease
Me from the forced camaraderie

Of driven young men,
And of my foolish trust that allowed
Her to leave me lost among the trees.

June 2003

Subway

No reading,
No writing,

Just the roaring
As we watch

The woman
Across the aisle

Make herself beautiful
With a brush.

August 2003

Subway from the West Side

From a distance I got my hopes up
He was praying or at least was bent in misery.
Two trains came roaring in, all screeching brakes

And other commotion they can make.
The traffic on the uptown side, not one
Where I had come to be.

The delay was no affair of his. He had his focus
Where it belonged, not on God or personal woes
But Herman Hesse, as I saw when I drew near.

Some years ago a girl from blocks away
Instructed me to make *Siddhartha* mine.
I could have told him how now she walked

The earth with tissues in her ears to block
What people had to say or of the ferry
From Dover to Calais and the news she broke

Amid the channel spray of a genius friend
Better in bed than I could ever be.
Or the grade school that had brought me

To this subway stop with the burden
Of a weeping mother on my thin back.
I could have told him of the past I live with

And so seldom see and how only the cover,
Not the content, of his book is within my memory.
You might wonder why it is that I might want

A young man coupling with the divine
And I could ask myself the same.
The thing is I had a bag in tow and had been thinking,

On first sight, that I had found a friend.
A train is really the eye of God
On the ground established

As its domain. Does it need
To be said that he not once
So much as looked my way?

August 2003

Speak Up

Today I apologized to a man
Impatient for his stubble beard
To more fully appear on his brutal face.

Yesterday we whacked each other good.
He frightens me with his oedipal mantra
And the relentless drive of a gnawing rat.

Still, there was no call to tell him
He was loathsome in the distant eyes of the many
And the closer view of the precious few.

Tonight, though, tonight, there will be
A freshening bath in the open air
And the parted thighs of Yevgeniya.

Tonight, following a sunset like
Dripping honey will be heard
A call to adventure to buzz your inner ear.

Tonight there will be explosions
To make the body quiver
In a dark that plans to stay a while.

2003

Song

All morning this song
A woman singing to her child
Her precious child

All morning this song this sound
Of love—can you believe it so?—
For everyone the universe has known.

No, I cannot leave its spell to reveal
Its source or say if it dissolves the film
Of deadness in the murderer's eye.

No specifics, not now,
Just the song
And the sweet joy it brings

May 2003

Sintra

Spine curved like a taut bow
I heard the trainer's words:
"Those old people walking bent and hooked?
That's you in twenty years unless..."

Outside I addressed the multitude:
"Once I felt blessed because I had my honey,
And now for being alone. Is it possible
I'm the prisoner of an ongoing delusion?"

In that crowd a man accompanied by Beauty
Met me with a look that said,
"To what unfortunate species do you belong?"
The look I gave him back replying,

"Stay alive and count yourself lucky
Should you come close to finding out."

October 2002

September 5, 2003

Celeste, I've just received the test results,
And any reservations I may have had
About bisphosphonates (p.?)
—high liver enzymes and all the rest—
Are dispelled for now.
The words *persistent osteoporosis in the spine*
Will do that, but the morning was marked
By good purpose as I was able
To ignore the piles of manuscripts,
My forlorn treasure, and just write
And write with the desperation
That has been given me.
But now, out and about, let us turn
To an appreciation of this gorgeous afternoon,
The rich green of the grass and the dappled light
That sets my heart aching in love of the earth
To which none of us are forever bound.
But something else, Celeste, the restless yearning
That drove my long arrested alcoholism,
Some longing for more than the world can give.
Transitions occur in the way that they can.
I am now in the Whitney, where Kennedy's head
Is blown off yet again and "He's So Fine"
Plays from a jukebox I can't see.
My school was down the block.
We wore a blazer with a crest.
Maybe that's what I'd been thinking:
To be young without being physically young—and free.
A painter named Ellsworth Kelly showed his colors
In red and blue and green, the note
Reminding me that these are primary.
Gratitude was mine to have,
As it is important to build on a foundation
Of fact, wherever the mind might flee.
And now I am here, in the museum garden,
Eating a banana and sipping chamomile tea,
Where I periodically glance at women
From a place of relative neutrality.
More to come, Celeste. More to come.

Room

I move through a room with walls painted white
Where the women look right past me
To a room with walls painted red
Where passion has had its hour,
The women spent and the men spent
And words dispensed with thrift

To a room no more than a smoldering ruin
Where giant butterflies flutter
And a child, half-smiling through
The onslaught of her senses, sings
Listlessly, dragging her blood-drenched doll,

To a room where men and women eat the air
With knife and fork and ponder the concoctions
Of their restless minds.

In that room will you find me now.

May 2004

Rejection

I've been here before,
This place I cannot pretend
Does not exist, seated
Next to a stranger
Intent on articulating
The heart of the matter:
Asymmetry in relationship
Is where you scale a mountain
Only to be tumbled back down
Again by a simple yet emphatic no.
I don't have to like a man
To agree with him, not at my age.
Not when things I thought
Were going up have fallen to the ground.

November 2002

Friend

House and wife and job gone,
He then drank himself out of the little room
On the desolate strip and onto the street.
He said he was all right on his own,
That neither AA nor the men's shelter
Was for him.
Said riding and sleeping on the subway
Would reduce his overhead and give him
The time he needed to move forward
With his long delayed novel.
His hair wild, his eyes pained,
His pants shapeless and torn,
He said he had never been more focused,
Now that he was free of the cares of the world.

Rats

They knock about in the walls
And warm themselves on the stove
And totter across my desktop
On their journey of self-discovery.
My cats they stave off with poison fangs
And the promise of a new day,
Offering a reminder of the experience
We need in order to stay alive.

August 2003

Reading

At the lunch hour I pull from the shelf of the public library a book on prosody. Can you dance without knowing the steps? “Yes. You’re better off,” the famous poet said. Uncomfortable eye contact is made with a man drifting from aisle to aisle. “Can you help me? I’m lost in my search for books on screenwriting.” He too is seeking a receptacle for his pain. Today I am not the savior of his world. Today I send him to the librarian. At the bag check before the exit I say, “So you’re off to graduate school,” to the young woman clutching to her chest a prep book on the GRE. Who is this strange man who has barged into her world and dreams? So her eyes say. In the park the same woman lies on the grass, the open book covering her face as a shield from the sun. I am elated with my book on prosody. I read three pages and am full of hope. Then I do what I do best. I put the book away and stare at the woman. A man has to have a life. A man has to have a time when he can just stare at the real thing. To my left the lost man I left behind. He too has found a book and brought it to the park. He too is staring, and directly at me.

July 2003

Voices for the President

“A president has to know
Where the truth is coming from,
See from the bottom while
Looking down from the top,
Possess magisterial proportions,
Reconnoiter for justice wherever
It can be found.”
So Louise was heard to say.

“The force of him was not apparent
When we met. It was only after
Long acquaintance that I truly had
The sense of his potential.
The marvels of science,
May I say, were not at all a party
To his mind and the sedentary postures
Of the supposed innocent laughingly eluded him.
We had no means for containment
But were, if I am to say, his shield.”
So Mildred replied.

“The clippers will not hurt you
If you just don’t pick them up.”
This from a source requesting anonymity.

April 2003

By the Way

People are praying.
The concierge is praying
And the head of the security guard
Is bowed in prayer
And Hermione Gunifedes is praying
Amid the clutter on her desk.

There is nothing to say about this prayer
Except to notice it as one does,
Not like the spinning wheels on a speeding truck
Or the flight path of the capricious sparrow
In sync with bursting spring
But more akin to the constancy
Of an unmoving wall.

Once I rode a bus
Of silver and green away from the city
And into a park
Where marshmallows and franks
Were speared on sticks and held in
A fire of burning wood. Heaven was
In the daylight run of children through the fields
And in the cautionary words of nuns in black as well,
Prayer holding no degree of urgency back then.
It was only the wonder of our breath and the red Keds
On which I sped.

But now here, in the cubicle spaces of the org,
Are people praying: Celia Duarte and
Solomon Cesnow and Fortuna Glover and
Cameron Sofler and Agnes Gant and
Alcibiades Malincourt and Buford Reheboth.

At all hours of the day
A silence envelops the org.
At all hours.

April 2004

Portugal

There on the street I stared and stared,
Causing her to return my gaze,
A situation like that requiring words,
Even on this island where we live.

“You don’t remember? We went out
And then you didn’t call,” she said.
It came to me—how she walked
Right by and disappeared
Down the subway stairs some weeks after.

Other things came too:
Her surprise that I had never lived
Elsewhere than this city.
“The world didn’t want me enough
That I shouldn’t stay,” I said.

There is strangeness on these streets
And I just may be part of it.

The woman who called me once a month to say
We were finally going to have *that coffee*
But never did or the one last week, reed thin,
Preparing for virtual surgery.

“We will continue,” I said,
“On my return from Portugal.”

“Portugal? I must go back
To where I have never been.”
This she said to me.

October 3, 2002

Plaza

My whole life ruined by trying to be good
Even when I was bad, I tried to tell her
Out on the plaza where she had gone
To cop a smoke, but she waved
My words away, and so I regrouped
And asked if she knew
What kind of tree that was,
Pointing to the honey locust with its leaves
Less fragile than they appear,
Causing her to do some pointing of her own,
Directing my gaze skyward with her index finger
To the bird in spiral freefall toward the earth.

June 2002

Perl

Perl, I can't talk to you
Situated as you are
At the crossroads of eternity
Gathered there among
The oblivion-suited ones.
My seeming callousness shrieks
And places no limits on the shame
It can endure.
Weeping and supporting sighs.
And no switch to be found
To shut down your long-playing stuff.
Perl, you're like some sister of mine
Fouled by your own dark shit.
I don't mean to offer disrespect
With scatological abrasion
But I'm watching you grow old,
Your brother's passing just another reason
For that day to come.
That's the thing with truncate nation.
We are just the little ones in blades of grass
We got those little legs no one wants
To carry us to those little places no one sees.
I'm not the one to come to about death.
You'll find me difficult and harsh.
Why that is I just can't say
But the whole thing makes me
Want to laugh and laugh
And envy those so truly rich,
The ones in metered prose soliloquizing
Beyond the graves we dug.
No dirt's been done. They're freer than
A migrating bird and laughing at your family stuff.
Go on, get away. Do like me.
Deposit it all packed in tight
In some big box beneath your bed.
There is no need to hold your father's hand,
Not when he put you in the fractured state he did.
Wake up to your own hurt, you jackass fool.
Out of that dark old room.
I'll be right here waiting outside the door
When you do.

July 2003

Penny

I picked up the penny beside the dying man.
And walked myself free from his lack.
That day I saw insanity present
At the lunches of the rich,

A cortege for the homely,
The crumbling of crenellated towers,
Children's toys where I could not reach them,

White gulls gliding with eyes only for me,
Men bearing arms between their strong teeth,
Inanimate objects begging for mercy,

The lure the earth would have me believe it is.

July 2004

A Perfect Moment

In the park I had one by the pond
On which a solitary boy
Had dispatched his miniature boat.
An October afternoon, the sun
Hidden and a dark clarity
Sitting on the textured water.
The green of the trees rich too, blending
With the verdigris roof of the nearby
Pavilion to create an enclave of beauty.

Earlier I had been to the Whitney, the Hoppers
Offering their vision of atomized America,
And the Met, where I saw, among Avedon's
Portraits of swells, several Southwest
Drifters beyond any use for the spoken word
Or the people who utter them, and sat
When I could no longer stand in the presence
Of their rootless ways.

Just a few things I want you now to know
As evidence that I was here.

October 2002

Once Again

Pause in the shadowy
Afternoon light.
Rest there in sweet safety.
You have found it again,
The living room
Of your childhood apartment
Before the grownups return home.

September 2003

Omega

The woman in white got up from her chair,
A thing you could still do back then.
Blond hair. White shirt.
New meaning to the words *bare feet*.

Sparks flying in the big hall where she stood.
An exchange of cards.
She the one who started it,
Though he was quick with his response.

I walked around the room.
The chairs were in my way.
Movement awkward,
With so many eyes upon my face.

On the porch I spoke with a stranger.
Where she lived. What she did.
Ashrams spoke from within
Her long gray hair.

Over her shoulder I could see
The woman in white step from the hall.
She had an escort now, a woman with a weathered look
Who knew the value of the other's goods.

A café that required stairs.
A table alone while others were in company.
The chamomile tea was good to me.
I kept the bag inside the cup.

“Two scoops, not one,” was my advice
To the woman in white,
Staring with her troubled face
Into the ice cream place.

A wife and mother in a Republican state.
A financier husband at whom she was irate
For the lack of equity in their deal.
I mostly listened to the details of her face.

Some years ago a house down the road
On seven acres of gifted property.
Treated wood and the car I bought
Only to find it was not my own.

The woman in white had an astronomical bent.
Outside she put her eye on Mars. It was real and
It was there. Even as a speck it had a weight
To press upon her own.

And then the escort reappeared.

We came to a crossing on the path,
Where the two went on their way.
In a presuming dark, I saw what could become of white,
A mocking planet now entered in my space.

August 2003

Novel

“Public judgment,” Marianne said,
Back in New York one morning.
Not really a friend, if what you mean
By friend is someone who confides
As well as listens. I was coming to her with
The wonder of what I had done, four years

Of solitude, this novel growing and growing,
And now the entrée to this powerful agent.
My befuddlement over the sample to submit
Before leaving all 1300 pages with her assistant,
Then hightailing it out of there in fear
Of being arrested for expressing myself on paper
In the way that I did. The feeling that I had
Dropped off a bomb.

Marianne moving me away from the sandblast
Operation going on at the corner building, men
On scaffolding in their gear. “Facelifts can be
Toxic,” Marianne said, before disappearing.

Overseas now I have just come from an Internet café
And a failed attempt to access my e-mail.
Looking for the reply from her, the agent,
Figuring she will send it when I’m out of town,

The note that says we don’t want you,
No one of our stature ever will.

A blind man on the corner, and people lining up
For directions. Portugal, a place I’m getting to know.

October 2002

Note to a Friend

In the elevator this morning
Is a woman from Indiana who says
Heat and humidity are good for corn
But not for people. She has figs
In her pocket and bottled water in her bag
And hair that thrives on its own perplexity.

You have never visited the Midwest
And aren't planning to any time soon
Though you also hold to the notion
Women from those parts more readily mate
And the island of Manhattan has long since
Become the unspeakable in headlong
pursuit of the unavailable.

Your problem is a small one and you should
Definitely laugh. Some great classical recordings
Await if you'll only surrender the time to listen.

July 2004

Nominee

Note the excess of anger in his teeth
As he eats his chips by the TV,
And reflect on his shouted words
“The country has been abducted”
That resound now in our ears.

And hear him as well in what
He further says:

“Lady, I will be frank and express
My annoyance that you blocked my path
As I tried to pay for my container
Of hummus, the kind with green olives
You can’t find every day.

This is the truth I would like to speak,
That I am small but made large
In the secret places that I go:
Booze hound, welfare cheat,
Running dog of everything,
My hat is in the ring.”

July 2004

Night

In bed I turn to Maddux,
13 and 5, ERA well under 3,
On track for 15.

The need for some kind of success
In this life, even another's.

And of course there is you,
you too I see,
Silent, aloof,
as you were earlier,

No chance of building
on what I foolishly
Thought we had started
the week before.

No room within you
For the likes of me.

September 2002

Danger Zone

What does it mean for you to live in me like this
And turn me to words like
Longing
Desolated
Bereft?

What could it mean that you walked out of my life
Without any means to find you?

I would stand by windows, by doors,
I would swim oceans at full turbulence,
For the chance to see you again.
How, then, did I let you go?

But how did you know to enter as you did,
The questions to ask
The silence to practice
The look to possess?

Are these questions too much to ask
Here where I remain with you?

2002

Mr. Normal

I was not the criminal.
He was visiting with his mother
Down the road,
The way that criminals tend to do.
So I told these folks who looked
And listened without releasing
The scales of justice from their trembling hands.
The courthouse clock was a marvel of stability,
Watching Frankie down below get stabbed in the rain
And Johnny drink a pint of turpentine outside the general store.
“I will slay you all,” I stood and shouted,
And heard the assembled shout in reply,
Seeking the last word it was not
For them to appropriate,
“When you rise to the level of your own deceit,
You better just sit yourself back down again.
We’ve been dealing with you monkeys
A long, long time.”
“Hah,” I retorted. “There can be no settled claims
In an unholy land, the pleasure of my company
The highpoint of your flat-lined lives.”

September 2003

Men

White shirts
Fat suspenders

Ties tied
Right

Hair ready
For the day

The forward motion
Of the train

Flying along
The straightaway

(Once there were
Posses

Riding hard
For justice)

Dispersed to
The trading floor

The forty-fourth
The ninety-ninth

They're coming back
She says

Get down
Now

Wheels savage
On hard-pressed rails

We wait.

December 2003

Lunch Hour

I'm here now, at work, in cubicle mode,
Typing what I have seen and felt and heard.

Casting the net over time.
Something like that.

Ed wants to take mescaline.
He got the idea from some book he's reading.

On the subway a ranting panhandler
Shared with the held hostage riders

His discovery of masturbation
And the passion he came

To have not for women but for walls.
A mother glared while holding tight to her baby boy.

The phone has just rung, the caller someone
Who doesn't like me in the way that I like her.

Noted: My sister-in-law has a spare bedroom,
Somewhere in Florida.

Is that a problem,
Given that my brother is deceased?

A dream from the other night.
A penis growing out of my knee.

Detail: it had the firmness
Of a wilted stalk.

Peanut butter and pita bread
And two oranges for sustenance.

It's been going on like this for days.
Counting the pennies.
Trying to keep things from flying apart.

November 2003

Luke

The rain striking the pavement
Like those sinkers you weighted
The fishing rod with back then.
You, umbrella-less,
A drenched blimp
With pockets turned out
On posh Fifth Avenue.

My rage at your defenselessness.
Tell me you weren't telling me something.
Tell me you weren't out on your feet.
Tell me you didn't come back
Just so you could die
In front of me.

Behind the anger the fear, of course,
That you would bequeath to me
Your mess, that now, as years
Before, you would lack the will
To care for those you had called
Into this world.

Some history, you say, from the grave
Where you have gone. How about age
Eighteen, your stated intention to marry
Her, the high school dropout from down
The block big with your first child?
You so proud of your impregnating power
And she shooting me a territorial look,
Smelling my reservation about the enterprise.

Six months later the baby was here
And you were gone, living with the
Girl whom I'd been seeing.

Nothing really to fault you for,
Brother of mine,
The pattern you established,
Your recklessness,
Only a mirror of my own.

October 2002

Love

I'm missing you.
Hearing the sound of your breath
I wander fruitlessly
Amid the cold stones.

At the lunch hour I eat peanut butter,
Four spoonfuls when I meant to have two.
Your fault, I'm sure, men exceeding their limit
At the mention of your name.

What is it about a sheep bound for slaughter
That excites your blood? What is this frequently
Visited place you have reserved for sharpened knives?
What is this slow death you torment me with?

"Anna, I am too old," I say,
And you laugh. I see the red stains
On your sharpened teeth
And cannot bring myself to care.

February 2004

Love Song

I'm afraid of you.
I need for you to leave.
I don't want you.
I've had enough of your guilt,
Of your hand out.
You got what you deserved.
Your pain the only thing you've earned.
There. I said it.
Now go away,
Go away, I said.
Let me eat in peace, for Christ's sake.
One more minute and I'll have the police on you.
Force is the only thing you respect.
You want it, you're going to get it.
Don't say I didn't warn you.
I'm sick of your kind.
This has been building for a long while.
You're going to pay.
You're really going to pay.
Dearly.
You will come to know the meaning
Of that word.

June 2004

Listening

Down the hall from this party
Filled with riotous laughter
Sadness is sunk
In the hearts
Of those who partner with walls
Lying down
With the silence,
Making love to the silence,
Sleeping in the silence.

January 2004

Lisbon

Baixa. Alfama. Barrio Alto.
Tortured old streets and a boulevard
Of liberty beyond 24-hour CNN
Back in my room. On the outskirts
An enormous casino fronted by palms
And somewhere to the south the rumor
Of beaches where women are kissed
Naked by the Portuguese sun.

But right now I'm doing business
At something called the Movijovem,
Where young people abound.
The girl—she can't be anything more—
Is working the stalled computer, trying
To secure my booking for Lagos,
Assuring me, with a laugh, that I'm not
Too old for hostel lodgings.

Above her, cantilevered, dance the women
Of MTV, distorted faces filling the screen.
Outside is where it's at somehow,
A line of the elderly awaiting their lunch
At the seniors' center.
I passed one such man on the way in,
Tieless in an old and worn suit,
Shuffling along in the vacancy of his days.

October 2002

Book Report on Abe

Momma did not shoot him.
She did not abduct him into the slavery
He would free others from. She just saw
His photograph and fell in love because
Her father was a boy in Sweden who grew
To have a similar countenance,
This sometime after Abe was no longer going on.

History is not a muzzle on the mouth.
It has room for the extinct *and* the lonely.

Momma loved the kindness in his face
And the way his hair reached up for the heavens.
She had no need to slip and slide in Pennsylvania
Avenue mud or hear the racket of a passing carriage
To recognize he had a wisdom surpassing
The bayonets he had launched or that a force

More powerful than a bullet operated in his head
To produce the oratory he delivered. She just related
The words *hallowed ground* to the country where
She had not been born and the fearful distance
She had swum to arrive as Momma on this distant shore,
A stovepipe hat laughing on her own battered head.

October 2003

Letter to the Air

A man seen from my window
Hosing the sidewalk free of blood.
A smooth phone solicitation
From another seeking the code
To my wallet. Transplants newly arrived
Dismissing the effect of history
On the air we breathe. Others
Espousing a predatory imperative
That would label poverty a sin.
There was something else,
But for now I don't know where it has gone.
I'm mostly indoors these days.
It's where my life has taken me.
The drooping leaves of my spathiphyllum
A cry for help. Let me now tend to the needy.

August 2004

Leaving the Doctor

This money could be used for other things,
I will say as she listens with an ear I cannot see
And her power waning to hold me.

I will tell her of the woman who said no
And the relief it brought to sense I had been spared
The dangers we face when crossing generational lines.

I will tell her too of the man beside himself
Over a teenage daughter who takes and takes as she leaves him
For her life and another who calls simply to hear a voice

And of the strange city I plan to explore and of the desolation
Or possibility that will await me around every corner when finally
I am away from her. This she will know when I step through her door.

May 2004

Lawyer

She got her lawyer after me.
Smith Mahoney Weiss and more.
Creatures of the Thirty-ninth floor.

Gray-haired Mr. Bogan had a bonding strategy
He employed, saying how he judged us
To be about the same in years.

I told him what initially she said to me—
“My father’s not the man he seems to be”—
Only to discover some years later what she meant.

His visits in the dark to her childhood room,
The nightmare appropriation of her space.
How, recalling these things, she would wake me from sleep.

“I’m going to die” is what she said.
The tremble in her voice and frame.
Inceded. Anorexic. A foreign tongue I had to learn.

Me a proxy for her father as her anger broke.
“You’re sucking my blood,
My lord and master,” was her refrain.

I could not leave without my saying.
This Mr. Bogan not so silk suit steady
Upon the footing of his own mind.

Some instability showing in the bleakness
Of his midlife face. The sublet downtown
Replacing the suburban commute,

And with it a tale of his own to tell,
Of a love he’d lost to match my own,
As I signed on lines his X’s led me to.

The light intense on the avenue where soon
I walked the thirty blocks back to work,
Thoughts of self-betrayal not welcome in my mind.

August 2003

Labor Day, 2003

A cat was in the garden. Others soon appeared.
Short hairs. Long hairs. For a while I made
A thing of it, with the little calls that
I pitched to them and the attention in my look.

Celeste, it was not a good afternoon,
Blocked as I was by angry thoughts
Of you. Your selfishness in giving
To others and withholding from me.

Have I told you about the movie theater
Near to where I sat and the X-rated films
Once featured on its marquee? You could have
Found me there with a pint of brandy

One snowy Christmas day. But the theater
Has cleaned up, and so have I. The drinking
Thing is gone, and I now have videos
Deep in the underwear drawer, for home TV.

(Camp you've heard about, Celeste. How
The counselor for Christ found my pack of smokes
And nearly twisted off my ear in seeking
A confession that the devil had me good.)

It's night now. Tomorrow is work, but the real thing
Is my heart— the pain when I'm apart from you
In the judgments that I make. I want them to disappear,
Like those cats that crept into the bush, out of sight of me.

September 2003

Heading South

An elderly woman gave excessive thanks for placing
Her suitcase in the overhead rack as the Miami-bound
Amtrak left Penn Station. Teenagers wearing
Christians for Nixon T-shirts gathered in the lounge car
To watch *American Graffiti* on the big screen.
For a time I minded my own business reading *Pale Fire*
But then the blackberry-flavored brandy I had been swigging
Called me to the baggage car to check out the red clay earth
Of North Carolina under moonlight and to kiss it deeply
With an axe pulled from its clamps.

The following morning the judgment face of the elderly woman
And the kids for Christ cowering as if you were the devil.

In Key West, troopers issued a tear gas caress,
Driving me from behind the weeping willow
Where I had been spending time alone
Nipping bourbon from a wide-mouth bottle.
Seeking refuge in the ocean, a girl and I
Swam among the barracuda and made love
On a pier while a trooper shone a flashlight from his car.
Later we ran barefoot up and down Duval Street
Trying to blend with the tropical air. In my
Rented room the girl poured her whole life story
Into my one good ear, how she had come south
To visit and now was living in a tent. "You are surely
The remotest man I ever met," she said.

Car lot pennants snapping in the breeze.
Loggins and Messina singing "Please Come to Boston."
An Olivetti portable to make sense of my life and speed
To keep it going. Something like that.

July 4, 2003

On a baked street in the white heat,
His blackness rich and final,
An African sells his leather wares.

An actress—luscious Isabel Rue—
Bolts the screen to kiss him with an
Open mouth. What is the tyranny of this

American blondness calling men out of
Their middle age and longing for the life
That got away?

Above them the heads of the discarded,
Gargoyles on the red brick walls—Tennis Joe
and Fat Luella and Iris with her talking teeth.

Flags droop in the breezeless air.
Those who can patrol the blistered boulevard
With signboards as their shields:

—Rest home equals boiled egg rolled
Along a dirty floor.

—Long live the popping sound of a head
Crushed by a Broadway bus.

In the cool basement of an abandoned church
A woman cries for her deceased.
From the vaulted ceiling a broken clamp lamp stares.

Celeste called this evening. The dull phone
Awoke. Her nonagenarian father has blood
In his urine. Her mother acting dotty in the lobby.

The president in the mounting days of his anger,
The nation counting along with him.

July 2003

Job

Is something on your mind?

I completed a task my boss
Asked me to perform.
I put fibers of my being
Into the thing
And could not sleep
Till it was done.

Who is your boss? What is her name?

She is a wind out of Texas,
A force of her own creation,
With legs like thick oaks
And a girth as wide as the world.
Her name is Bella
And she resembles my mother.

What state are you in now?

I am in the pain it was mine to experience
Given the unbearable closeness
The finished deed has wrought.
She has praised me in a way
That offers only poison as its legacy.

Can you explain?

I am in the room my mother would call me to
When childhood was mine. I am in the place
Of apartness where we went behind the locked door
With meadows in the distance
To bask in the glow of my stellar report card.
I am in parks and in towns
And on streets without names
But always I am with her
In the goodness mode
She established in my internal apparatus.

Will you be all right? Should we call for assistance?

I will be one with myself
When my bearings are gained
Separate from her person and I can
Open the door now closed to begin
My journey to a destination I'm not sure of.

Describe it for us. Try.

It has a high cliff looking down

On a foaming sea
And places for warm tea.
It has boulevards where the old
Who lack means
Are blown about
On icy streets
By winter winds.
It has terrifying depths
And the superficial majesty of heights.
It has paths that come to an end
But leave you in sight of others
And the stray newspapers
Everyone in the fall of his life
Learns to ignore
And sophisticated offerings
That will leave you speechless.
Mostly it has prayer every hour on the hour,
The exhortation to enter the inner space
Where your hope is to be found.

July 2004

January 12, 2004

I forgot to tell you about Donovan
And the harsh and mocking attitude
Dylan displayed toward him.
Donovan sang him a sweet song
But then Dylan sang him a great song
Full of American complexity,
The camera right there on Donovan's face
To record his smiling distress.
I was worried for Donovan, pained for Donovan.
It felt like Donovan was getting run over
By the express and would he manage to live?

That was in 1965. I remember two years later
Listening to Donovan, yes Donovan, in my room,
Something called "Wear Your Hair Like Heaven,"
So clearly he got to live beyond
The blow that he had taken.

You of course weren't in my life back then
But Sarah was. She was heading off for Europe
And I was at a loss how to stop
The constant roar of pain.
I lost the room and sat on the stone steps
Of a church with no thought of going in.
I remember a newsstand with a light against the dark
And the smell of the air through the sidewalk vents
As the subway rushed past, the way I did
A lot of rushing in that time of frantic need.

January 2004

January 11, 2004

Celeste, the film on TV was called
Don't Look Back, from which you were
Spared by your classical training.
Even this morning I bear the pain of it,
Dylan's angel beauty burnished,
Not consumed, by his words of fire.

A theater down the block was where
I saw it first with my girlfriend Sarah.
A Food Emporium stands there now
(waxed apples and taste-free tomatoes
And meats that are not for me).
"He's a genius and you'll never be
A genius. You're not even smart,"
She said to me that crisp fall night back then.
Her family had a four-bedroom apartment
And a country place and Harvard
And Radcliffe as elements of their pedigree.

Her parents are gone and the property too
But I received a card from Sarah
Over Christmas in block letters,
Her children's hand informing me
She wears tissues in her ears and carries
A blade to slash the viperous tongues
That would torment her days.

Oh Celeste, the phone rang late
On this night that the moon had spurned
And I was there to answer a man child
All alone who wanted
To drink himself into eternity
And make it glow so he could be
The brightest star in the firmament.
And so I encouraged him to pray for half
The time we had been speaking
And align himself with the greater good
The universe is calling us to.

Celeste, let this be a record of where things stand
Before they shift again so you won't ever
Lose sight of me in the space you said I could have.

January 2004

In the Dark

Celeste, last night here at home
I ate as much as I could from the big bag
Of popcorn while watching *The Fugitive*,
Then had the pea soup from OrganicOnly
On the corner. That's the thing about Manhattan.
Things are at hand. But the question in the movie
Was whether justice was at hand or all hope of it
Would disappear like the fugitive freedom Harrison Ford
Was seeking to preserve. No one should be calumniated
By the state for things he has not done and be made to
Live on the run from all that he holds dear. That's why
I was so glad he had Tommy Lee Jones on the case
Mustering all his intelligence so you gradually
Saw him coming over to the side of Harrison Ford's
Truth. Everyone needs a champion, Celeste, everyone,
And while I'd like to dwell on rocks and flowers
Or things less substantial that yet provide some
Natural delight, I need this morning to speak of that
Which burns within me and you'll please bear with me as I do.

I know there were reasons practical and spiritual for me
To forgo a lawyer in the divorce proceeding and sign
The papers your own lawyer presented, but it does pain me
That you just smiled when I expressed some doubt
The other night for the first time in all these years
As to the wisdom of my decision. Like a wall that smile was,
Sealing you in and sealing me out. That smile said a lot, Celeste.

In any case, don't be thinking I watched a movie for the entire night.
I saved the ending for this evening so I could give some time
To the book on the Armenians you told me to read.
It's not like I don't know about them. My father was one,
After all, and held tight to the practice of his own silence
Except for the times he would shout, out of the blue,
"We lost everything. Everything." I'm going
To finish the book all the same and ask that Tommy
Lee Jones be assigned to that particular case as well.

January 2004

Important!

“Don’t spend your life lying on sheets that sweat,”
The Hassid said. “Meditation is a joy, even
When you peek at the clock.” Maddux won last night,
Evening his record at eight and eight. Spent some time
Calculating what he needs to reach 300 and his schedule
For the rest of the month and into August. Something to savor,
How he has come back from that 0 and 3 start, though his ERA
Is still over four. All’s right with America so long as Maddux wins.
It’s been that way my entire life. Jerry West. Koufax into his stretch.
Mean Don Drysdale coming from the side. The time I ran away
To Philadelphia as a teenager and fell down weeping on seeing
Old Shibe Park as I turned the corner. My hero, number 53, in Dodger
Blue, matched up with sliver lips Jim Bunning, both of them throwing
Goose eggs and the game going into extra innings. After midnight,
Sitting hungry in the dark bus, the man across the aisle saying,
“You spitting at me, man?” as a harbinger of things to come.

Here this morning, on the subway, a child lit with life and her attentive
Mother, their interaction more engaging than the *New Yorker* story
I was reading. At Seventy-second Street I changed to the express.
Sudden anger hearing the yip yap man cataloging the things of his life—
Wife and family, all that stuff. But changed the channel, remembering
The Pink Panther movie a few nights before. Elke Sommer something to see.
Still, not sure the flick held up. I know that Sellers is gone. What about her?

Another thing: An Iraq war vet, twenty at most, just back from a six-month
Tour of service. His head still shaved. Had trouble speaking. Stuff just too impacted.
Tattooed women gave him hugs before excusing themselves for dinner.
“It’s like a movie,” he shouted at the oncoming trucks. How to relate this to
1968, Tommy Brannigan in his Vietcong pajamas in a decompression rant in the Apartment we
shared on Amsterdam Avenue, down the block from
The Columbia engineering building. At the lunch hour will buy a birthday card
For my drifting nephew, my dead brother’s son. I know just what I’ll write.
I wonder where you are. Might as well be direct. The time has come for that.

July 2003

I See You

The stairs you see are for going down
From where you were above the ground
Until you see they're for falling down
And take them with the care they need
So falling down cannot occur.
Calling calling Father is from the bottom
Of those stairs and as you come to him
The train comes too, through the tunnel
Rushing rushing, Father pinning you against
The wall to keep you from the slicing
Power of those steel wheels
There in the gray light of a long-gone day.

January 2004

Noted

Not really about the surfer,
The Santa Barbara kid with the golden tan
Telling the mashed nose geezer,
Stogie in his slack mouth

And seat pad under his arm,
He was only doing the gig short term,
The old guy recalling how he'd said
Something similar forty years back,

Or the loneliness of the urine-streaked
Parking lot at 2 a.m.
Awaiting a rumored flight
From the Caribbean

Or what it meant
To drink with my passengers
And lose the whereabouts
Of my mind and my Checker

Or the painful epiphany
Seeing through their eyes
Not an interesting guy who drove a cab
But just a hackie in the deadness of his life.

Not any of that,
Or the sudden sense
Of doors closing
In the night

But more about
Up close
Those lips
Those jeans
Slung low
The awful hurt
To talk
And talk
And not
Enter
The place
Of silence
To touch
And touch

Some more

December 2003

Hair

At age fifty-six, Celeste, I've learned to comb my hair
And have Michael Douglas to thank for that—
You know, the son of the famous actor
Who has gotten famous in his own right.
(And said in one of his films how he doesn't
Look into the bowl after he has gone potty.
Said it with angry pride, as if to say there is something
Wrong with those of us who do.)

Things run together now, Celeste. Like a ball of string
Life becomes, compacted so you can hold it in your hand.
Something like that. The thing is to not throw the ball away.

Anyway (that's your word, Celeste), in *Wall Street*
He takes a comb and runs it through his wet hair
With just a few strokes, front to back.
Those are power strokes he is giving his hair
And a power boost he is creating for his face
To ensure it will not be in hiding, hair falling
Over the brow, as if there is something to conceal.

I'm doing the same now, Celeste. I'm doing the same.
I'm out on the street with my hair combed back
And full of gel and my face right there for people to see.
I'm walking along like it's time not to care:
Feeling good, feeling strong, feeling like a man
Finally should in the breezes that are blowing.

January 2004

Gold Rail

Goddess of the tavern you were,
Your blond hair set off
By the black uniform worn tight
Against your slender body.
Eighteen and stupid, I thought
I could win you over
With silence and numbskull goodness,
My repertoire featuring mad scribbling
To pique your interest.
Then came the day that beer-chugging lug
Claimed you for his own.
That he could use me as a toothpick
After a greasy meal and then expel me
From his surly mouth was the message
That he sent.

It was all forgotten till the other day.
Let me set it straight—aging subway
Straphanger, bearer of the invisibility gene,
Hair turned metallic gray, fends off blonde
More than good-looking with the book
He pretends to read.

June 2003

Going Back

Sometime after the towers received the planes
I began to weep, not only for those lost,
As you might think, but for my ex-in-laws,
Realizing suddenly they too were vanished

And had been for some time.
Only now did I feel their absence
And what they had taken with them.
Far away my life from where it was then,

As if peering front to back
Through the lenses of binoculars.
In a rental car I followed the old roads
Along a curving river, its bed now hard and dry,

And in daylight stood on the weedy lawn
Staring at the house in disrepair,
The sagging porch and no one in sight.
At night I returned, going where

I sensed I did not belong.
In darkness the house sat,
Not one light burning,
But there, in what used to be

A guest cabin, a small lamp glowed
Where, in a summer
Of my youth I had holed up
Full of vengeful fury

At their teenage daughter,
Compelling her mother
To pledge me to life
In noting the brightness of the day.

Some unreasoning fear took hold
At what I might see if I went toward
That light, and drove me from that scene
Before the time for leaving had passed.

October 2002

Stuck

Talk to me. Just talk to me.

I'm lonely. My heart aches, or so I say.
I cry, stuck here in this money trap,
Where everything is 401(k)
And the finish line I'm desperate to cross.
No words in German. No polyglot tongue.
No archaeological treasure to unearth.
Just laughing faces and conviviality
From which I am apart,
My door slammed shut once more.

Where have you been, lost boy?

I go where the mountains are bathed in grease
And the rivers stink of fried fish.
I go where the contaminants bring me
And breathe my own noxious air.
I swing on a pendulum of my own monkeylike deceit
And the ebbing features of my own mind.
I remain skillful about my own neglect,
Tarrying where the loaves were last sighted.
I am recondite and incontinent upon the wisdom pages
Of old books and am seen in strange places.
I watch movies in the dark with myself the only audience
And woogie woogie boogie all the night long.
I feed pigeons with the bread of the poor
And smile in a way so you won't need to talk to me,
Have features you can't find in just any tree,
And read old comics through all my waking hours.
My doorman is my father and I am his son of grief.
I call on all neighbors to help me
And they shower me with pain.
I am here where I can be,
Embodying the mass of truncate nation,
Adipose yet malnourished
As a result of your cuisine.
I consume streams and brooks
And am wild upon all the waters
Of the earth as the strange fruit
Of my master's creation.

Who is this god that regulates your regime?

My god is full of mercurial delight.
He covers continents to witness my defeat,
Leaves me neutered in some forlorn space,
And swaps stories with the landed gentry
In favoring previous centuries. My God
Lays me low with a sapping silence
In the service of his strength and is a rampage
Train roaring through a burning lake.

Come to me, my child. Come to me.

When I can. When I can.

July 2003

Get Out

The governor had eyes like laughing fire.
He wore a heavy coat back then. Always

The governor the only one in the room
Back then, before he became the law.

Now again the governor,
Right here outside my battered door.

Gone the lewdness in his bones for me.
It's time to leave, he says, he says.

“Get out, get out,” he says, he says,
Clapping hands to make like thunder.

There is a subway all my own.
You may ride it if you wish.

All my livelong life
Have I gone on it to and fro

Through ancient tunnels
Rife with the rich grayness of their years.

Will you not hear the commotion in my head
In roaring past the station of my youth

And see the young in sly position
To obscure my view?

North, far north, of where I ever
Could have lived,

I find a bench on which to sit.
White feet and strange legs appear below.

My mother was born in 1904.
My father never lived.

Of friends I have few.
I want to stay here forever.

I want to remember the dead.
I want to rest in their embrace.

I want these words to reach the stopped-up
Ears of those who would depart from me.

I will write to the governor.
My location will be his to know.

With my hand will I reach for his smooth face
And stroke it with my fearful touch.

June 2003

Foreign

You again
Occupying
Heart head
Everything
With no respect
For ramparts.

Are you happy
With your win
Your lighted teeth
Your glowing skin
The pleasure perks
That came to you
Early on
Your party-filled
Saturday nights
While I await
The defeat bus
For those
Who go alone.

You, yes you,
Who ride so high
With a last name
That could serve as a first
Unable to
Pronounce my own

June 2003

Fence

A fence is not constructed.
Plain to the eye that sees
It rises from the earth
Of its own accord.

April 2003

Father

I don't want to wear the clothes of dead people,
I said, on sighting the pretty woman,
Who turned me into the face
Of oncoming traffic.

I spoke with my father where he lay.
Was something on my mind
I wasn't saying? He asked.
He does it every time,
Messing about in my brain
For his misplaced supremacy.

The supine cadaver had malodorous
Breath and wore a goofy tie.
Tests in childhood showed him at the peak
Of bliss when in the speaking mode.
Being an old drunk didn't mean he was
A bad one.

Things were going OK until I remembered
The Bible he kept under his butt
And the cheat sheet he relied on
For words not his own.

In a city of scaffolds
Things fall and fall silently,
Pipes and planks
And monkey wrenches
So remorselessly falling
On the unsuspecting below.

July 2003

Dreams

A few are still with him:
Rescuing Momma from the bullets
That sought her life,
Feeling his brother's open wound,
The broom in the corner evoking terror
As a symbol of his father's rage,
The woman standing before the judge
With only a typewriter ribbon
As a band around her breasts.

As for the one he had the other night,
Fooling himself it would stay alive
In his memory when he awoke.

April 2003

Dining Out

The list is long of places I have been
Without you since we parted.
I just came from a restaurant on the Calçada
de Santa Anna, here in Lisbon.
Fish and boiled potatoes and two slices of lime.
A soccer match on the tube and a waiter
Who coughed into his hand.

On the stairs returning to my room
I spoke with my eyes to a woman
Heading out with her friends.
The night may be hers, I said,
But the morning will be mine,
Should the concierge remember
To wake me for my early start.

She had something to say in return.
You're hungrier than you know,
I believe it was.

October 2002

Dance with Me

Dear internationally famous person, I don't remember your face, just your blond hair teased like cotton candy from the Coney Island days of childhood. The noonday sun, let me say, was a beast, raising once again the question how anyone can deal with perpetual flames burning hotter than gasoline if having your bum fried in a giant pan is too much to take. It was strange to run into you, and my thoughts were even stranger, given my fatigue. Allow me, however, to assert their genuineness, if such can be ascribed to the vagaries of the mind. *I don't care about specialness. Don't tell me how great you are.* That would be a fair sampling. This in the challenging environment of bad food being devoured at outdoor cafes by folks who don't like to be seen in natural light.

The dance instructor used a French word for the step I couldn't get, "chasseur" or the like, as in *hunt*. He didn't offer me the French word for defeat nor prevent my early exit from the class. Beginners, my ass. The creeps were doing physics with their feet and logarithms with their hips. Some kind of precise purity was going on I couldn't get with. I've been here before, in this sort of sadness state, watching others perform while I sit on the sidelines offering an idiot smile. *What kind of man* and yeah yeah, cha cha cha.

The first thing about the woman on the bus was that she was young and pretty and required a second look. The second is the two weren't talking to each other and gave the appearance of strangers. Possibly they planned it that way. If so, the identical fish store Bags blew their game. No way she was going to lure me into something foolish so he could bust my face.

Let me tell you. It was a hard day at the Chinese laundry. The shirts and pants were beyond Mr. Wong's control, and his kids looked like they were making other plans. Everywhere you turn tradition is a memory and people are trying to get it back with minimal allocations of their time. Mister, you have a family business, you're going to have problems. Trust me, this is true.

2002

Country Scene

The spring door slams shut
As words are spoken.

The oak outside unshaken,
So rooted in the earth is it.

Celeste, when I talk about
Money in a rising cloud of fear,

It's not lily pads on the pond
Or the yellow notes of forsythia in the wind,

The shad tree heralding spring
Or the hawthorn's gaiety,

Not even lilacs lovingly clipped
For the parents who had wounded you.

Let's be clear, Celeste. Let's be clear.
It's that spring door slamming shut.

July 2003

Office Life

August 2003

Content migration and file formatting
The elusive logic of the algorithm,
Women speaking the words they speak
In the time they need to speak them.
What do they do when the silence comes,
When the night comes,
When they are alone with the silence and the night,
Having spoken the words they spoke
In the dynamic of the day?

Picture a man in the presence of these speaking women,
A man in the harness of his quiet routine.
Picture the brief itinerary of his words,
His lachrymose descent,
Once again with the short end of the stick
Tapping on an adjoining cubicle to confess
His love of Dire Straits.

See him out of touch with the anger that would billow,
That would incinerate.

Hear him remember the solarium, the sky-blue pool
Filled with mountain water. Hear him say the words
Beautiful losers of the family whose daughter he loved
And how, with D. H. Lawrence on his mind,
He traced the effects of classical and rock
Upon his being, resolving for one and not
The other so he could have a life of peace
Beyond the grip of bass-driven narcissism.

Go with him to the summer a blond boy
In seersucker jumps from a cliff taking
White teeth and *Fresh Cream* with him,
A summer in the euphoric spaces
Of a Dexedrine high eating Marty Ballin
Sounds and driving a car with his ass
To the wheel saying *white line continue*
Sarah liked to pee in an open field
With apple trees looking on...
In a panic leaving for dead the deer he had struck.

Ask him where he has been that the young
Now vote Republican and invest for life
And women show the protective instinct

Of their own immaculate incorporation.

See him leave the computer screen for the public library
Across the street, carrying Robert Lowell's *Selected Poems*
While recalling the agent saying last night about the novel
In her hands, "We're running a little behind.
Happens sometimes." Sensing there's something
In the sound of his voice that says he's not her type,
Not any of their types. Four years of morning exhilaration
Producing ecstatic prose. That voice on the other end of the line
Was just a voice, nothing more, he says now,
The rooms in his mansion have multiplying dimensions.

Yes, tired of Robert Lowell. Tired of his oppressive weight,
His pedigree, his IQ points and quadrangle casualness,
The tyranny of his name, the colossus dead in the back
Of a New York City cab.

Run out from under him, America, run out.

Then hear America laugh and say it already has
In the century past and witness a Teutonic woman
With helmet hair down by the river and his reaction
To her orange bike, saying, "Long ago and far away
Did I pee the bed in a house to which I had been dispatched,
A house with an apple that had to last for days and where,
With a child's love did I embrace such a bike,
Riding round and round a dirt path all for me. Tell me
That time has come again and I am back with
Those girls who deceived me with bedtime stories
Of kidnap by the railroad men. Tell me, please tell me."

Then hear her as she says, "Live before your bones
Grow brittle and break. Leave this land of unreality,
Your Dwight David Eisenhower and your Richard
Milhous Nixon and your sweet Sandy Koufax.
Leave Elgin Baylor and Don Drysdale and flee to where
The fire cannot cease your breath and lick your soul to death."

Then hear him roar his answer back:

"I am New York City born and bred and will die where
I need to be, local upon the ground of my own constituency,
Offering appellations for things that have no names
And stores of ignorance where none were known to exist.
More than this I cannot say with darkness finally come
And the apparel for my bedtime so strongly calling me."

Church Wedding

My friend married the other night
In a church still on its feet.
I was planning not to go,
Not wanting to be seen alone,

But when I arrived
I was happy to be free,
Unfettered,
While he was being bound.

My friend is of English descent,
You know, red hair
And the last name—Billingsgate—
To prove it.

I think he's closer to true love
This time than the last, when his ex
Ran off with the drummer man.
At the reception a woman said

She had danced with me
Eight years before
At wedding number one.
Under that mass of tumbleweed grayness

A child, wanting temporarily
What her friend the bride had got.
For a while we were going great,
But then she had to catch me

When I wasn't there.
That may be when she frowned
And said goodbye,
Hours before she left.

April 2003

Chinatown

Sorrow born of licentiousness cannot endure.
Somewhere between the station
And the street I heard this said.

And so I reached through the years and took you
In that Chinatown loft, to work with me,
You in your paint-splattered pants

And heard once again the N train rumble
Over the unsound bridge. "You called to her,
Right out the goddamn window. Don't lie to me,"

You said that night. A woman in red boots,
Disappearing down that dark Manhattan street.
The thought that she could save my life, that possibly,
Just possibly, she could.

June 2003

Celeste

Celeste, the woman I saw this morning had short hair like yours and caused me to alter my route. She reached into my mind and told me I existed. There is a way the eyes can do that when they look at you the way she did. How different from the grieving night and the tortured replay of foolish words. Can I tell you about the day I had, how eating the greasy spinach pie made me sad, as if once again I was a young punk listening to relentless Jack Jones on the jukebox while Gus at the cash register drew smoke up his nose? Even on a bright day, the air had a dirty feel to it, the city a corpse no one could revive. Always of course it is about us when I go back to that time, the sublet I was forced to take and the years of praying it would be you who had caused the message light to blink and how the sight of the red Subaru you drove could send me down, down and the area we had lived in was not a place for me to go if personal well-being was even slightly on my mind.

2003

Bryant Park

London plane trees flanking north and south
And to the west a fountain for the living
Faced off against a wall of gray fatigue,
A library the sun is pressed to coax into the light.

On the taxed grass a summer flock. The pigeons
Have taken flight, driven off by idling hawks tethered
To the forearms of silent men. We are here now,
Drawing from the colorful bags our poisoned food,
One man talking on his cell phone out of his ass.

A fire sale on snatches of conversation:
*My mother was to meet me. When will she arrive?
Does she not know by now a man does not like to be
Kept waiting?* Others illuminate the torrents
Of departed spring and drop an obliteration bomb
on flimsy concepts of uniqueness. *They give me all this
Responsibility but no authority. Do you hear me,
Mon? Do you hear me?*

The swell of thick necks, the crotch well maintained, the
Necrophiliac tendencies of the book-guzzling few, the lists
That would ignore eternity. *No, I will do you a deal.
How do you like that? You like it? Huh? Huh?*

Every day of the workweek I am here to burn off this prison
Pallor, on a mission to make my old flesh presentable to
The young. I have no walls to hide my own deceit, but my
Detachment from the Lord and Taylor windows works like
A shield. Whatever they install I just don't see. One week
It's a tank, another it's Christmas in Berlin and then another
A garter belt is running down Fifth Avenue with no one in pursuit.

I am hollowed out of everything but my sweet bed and the chronic
Grasping for a security beyond my reach, like the tall buildings
Seeking God while the planes right-angle through Times Square
As reckoning birds formatted for the evil touch.

And then he kissed me. What else are we to say when Brother Love
Makes his entrance, magnifying the gift of the consecrated life
With the smell of shit from his billowing suit, his impenetrable
Glasses the forward thrust of a powerful mind and pigeon feathers
Laughing in triumph in the band of his fireproof hat.

I am somebody, his signboard reads, a simple statement of his intent
To herald in the new world order and feed upon the rage that it provokes.

Brother Love does not discuss the scorched earth policy for the
Outdoor cafes or the end of luminous days or the fear of one who is
Introduced to the desire for his own life in the stalled subway train,

Nor does he ask the young to ponder the fate of an old tattoo or issue
Arrest warrants for the uncommitted blowing like abandoned
Papers through Manhattan streets.

Brother Love raises me from the grass in broken parts and instructs
Me to make the object of my affection last and last. He says it's
Time for me to learn to dance. His fierce face is surely in on this,
Disintegrating even seeds of argument in his midst.

June 2003

Boss

All day I was looking forward to sitting here at twilight,
Thinking I would find some deeper part of myself
And imagining the mood I would wear.
A busy day, with many demands, and a kiss from my boss
For a job well done. I've yet to tell her she's my mother,
Given her umbrella that blew away on a rainy Thanksgiving Day.
The clincher being the man who wouldn't fetch it for her,

Leaving her fat and alone and blocked from the relentless parade.
Her experience was enough to make me cry, though there's
A lot, with my imperfect love, I can't express.
On the subway a woman modeled a gimlet eye, saying
Fall derelict damned into the docket of my distrust.
Look. Let's not worry about every little thing, not when there is
Laundry to pick up and a salad to eat in the privacy of my home.

Oh, I'm in this chair all right, and the pain I'm in is unbelievable.
You'd be feeling it as well if you just spoke with your father
And killed him dead so now he is crying, too.
Still, it is safe here where I sit. Though the rain has come,
No wheelchair-bound are looking in the window. How long
This can go on I cannot predict. All I can truly say is that
The bed is calling and I am moving steadily closer.

June 2003

Boat Basin

The river has been waiting for them,
These stuporous men staring across
The water to the distant shore.

Behind them the roar of a freight
Over gleaming silver rails.

For years they had rested
In its rolling embrace.
Communities in stasis, whole villages

And continents fixed in place while they
Gained distance from their sight. Moonlight
And starlight and the dark of tunnels

Have been theirs. In cities that remain
A blur have they slept in back alleys
And donned the robes of drunken seers.

Now comes a barge to laze upon the river,
Drawing them, as one, to the water's edge,
Where they motion violently for a return
To their unobstructed view.

July 2003

Birthday Plus One

The sun has been shining on my kingdom
All day long. At night the light grows brighter still,
Joy an infectious element in my human mind.
Today the conversation has been about old New York.
Time is lacking to discuss who left the banana peel
atop the fire alarm box, a heartbreaking
Scandal of red and yellow creating
Mass migration to the other coast.
Let's linger instead on what the color
Of autumn means and what the weight
Of a fallen leaf can bring to one such as I
Sitting alone on this broken bench.

Last night my mother called from the grave.
"Eat normal food, my son," she said, directing
Me to the baked beans at the Automat.
My brother sleeps by the railroad tracks,
Daring the New York Central to section
Off his scalp, while my sister, so inclined,
Sings arias from the guy wires of the Brooklyn Bridge.

Oh mighty borough, that could break a man's
Heart, with a double vowel transporting us
To consonantal shores. I didn't mean
To speak of you, but where have you gone that
You are now so large before me with churches
In my face, my mother singing tenderly,
"And he walks with me and he talks with me,"
Her voice traveling through all doors
And into the waiting street.

September 2003

You

I suppose I should say something about her,
Child of depression on the footpath
Circling the Great Lawn
In Central Park on Christmas Day.
I suppose I should attach significance
To the fact that it was she, Louise,
With her Karl Malden face, and not
Some American beauty queen.

I received her with politeness,
Listening long enough to hear her
Say the museum would be open
The following day to provide a place
Of refuge from her solitary state.

A former drug addict took the stage.
All my life I've been a petty thief,
But I'm not about that now.
Now I give and give and give.
He had a militant way with his speech
Sufficient to summon clouds.
Blondes in party dresses sat nearby,
Having practiced their finest moves.
Hearing someone proclaim, *God's bounty,*
They all stood up.

Louise and I reached into the sky.
What a thrill to have a writing tablet
There at hand. We let God know we
Were tired of dying. We told him
Maybe he wouldn't mind
Some dying of his own so he could
See how humans live and made
Bitter jokes about his senile state.

Halfway through our written rant
We fell asleep, not as lovers often do,
But on the separate benches
The whimsy of the wind had led us to.

December 2003

You Were Under No Obligation

To be a friend and though the knife
You presented was startling
And yet expected, life has gone on.
Free and easy discourse is not
The order of the day and cannot be ignored
When it has a chance to happen.
This morning I bought a pair of socks
And a birthday card for my nephew Will
Who lives in Florida with his young wife Jen.
(He is young too. Don't think he isn't)
And watched a man's head turn at the sight
Of a small-waisted woman "carrying the goods,"
As he put it, allowing himself
To sound like a vulgarian.
Do women really know when they are beautiful,
And is it to their advantage? My friend Ed says
It can be a prison from which they have trouble
Emerging but he spent a lot of time in an ashram
And is coming from a different place.
Right now I am looking out my office window
Through a screen that mitigates the power of the sun,
Causing me to see the building opposite
In a kind of haze. This muting of its reality
Might become maddening did it not
Present the incentive to step outside
And see the structure with nothing coming in between.
Does any of this make sense?
Don't expect a stranger at your door
Or the connivance of coincidence
To bring me where I clearly don't belong.
Just imagine clear-sailing on open water
Toward a destination with the self-important name
Oblivion or eating a doughnut on some sun-shaded porch.
It's all one to me so long as I can be in the embrace
Of my present reality, some song of the universe singing
In my hidden ear which these poor words can only fail
To represent. Sooner or later I hope to arrive
At the meaning of what it is I'm saying.

December 2003

Work Walk

Rising from the subway to the street,
Freed from the horde,
I claim my own space
And as I walk the beautiful
Body I never had is mine.
Adulation is mine.
The hooded robe is mine.
The glorious left jab tattooing
My opponent's bloodied face also mine.
"What's my name? What's my name?"
I shout at my pummeled opponent,
As the master once did.
This emergence from anonymity—
Mine mine mine.

Now I am here.
The computer booted to life.
From the adjoining cubicle
The crinkle of aluminum foil.
Aged and economy-minded
Marian Redondo clogs her mouth
With home-bought treats
And tries to speak into the receiver.
Later she will scavenge for leftovers in the cafeteria.
Saving for retirement she is.

The meaning, please, of a mirror
Reflecting such ugliness back to me.

November 2003

Let's Talk

Behind the closed door are the women talking,
In a manner all their own.
“I am listening ,” I say.
“All my life have I been listening
From the other side of the door.
Now will I go down in the elevator,
Down and down will I go into the street
And I too will do some talking.
To the wind and to the trees
And to the stars in hiding will I talk.
As I walk I will talk to the light
As it fades into night
And the fading light will talk to me.
Amid shuttered shops and rushing cars
Will I walk and talk and receive
The incessant messages of the bereft
And lonely: to men with missing
Teeth and fallen women who have
Spilled the contents of their pocketbooks
Into dirty snow; to dogs set on fire just for sport;
To hot air balloons and sorrows
Irreducible by time and to women
Who die alone in single rooms scanning
The unrevealing sky for Jesus
And to women in asylums beaten unconscious
Before being tossed into rivers that smell
Of the stink we have imposed.
I will talk to the mortuary slabs on which they lie,
To old men lifting heavy bags on forlorn streets,
To my obese brother now deceased
About the need for death that he had sought it so.
I will talk to extinct frogs and birds of prey
Who have forsaken their pursuit and report back
For your take on what it is that I have found.”

February 2004

Winter Day

I want to thank you while I have the chance.
I didn't quite see you when
you stood there in front of me.
Recognition came later when I was home
Steaming vegetables and recalled
My absent-minded reply to your question
As to what I'd been up to and how
You stared at me as if I were speaking
In the language of mules.

January 2004

Where They Are

Gone the wild nights with the wind whistling,
Their hair mussed and their spirits soaring,
Hilarity reigning at the burst bag in the drenching downpour

Gone the ritual greetings and departures,
The garden and the car and the mortgage payments,
The flesh of their flesh no longer near.

Their lives now merging with the whiteness,
Hear them whisper from the wounded spaces,
“Oh you who are so loving and so tender”
On this other road where they have gone.

March 2004

Stop Sign

It will happen again.
When who can say?
When I am in transit on the stairs
When something is lost and cannot be found
When the workload is heavy
Or anger is threatening
Or the flowers at my feet
Have my full attention
Or the swings that hold the screaming children
Are all taken
Or a lone plastic shovel lying in the sandbox
Cries out for the neglect of it to be ended

It will happen the way it always happens
When I am engrossed with the paper in my hand
And the things of the day have fallen away

And when it happens
The streets will be alive with the current so long missing
And I will walk them remembering back to

Old Miss Jenkins in room 7B3 who set rags and paper
Ablaze in the public bathroom
So the firemen would come with their hooks and ladders
And rescue her from the unending loneliness of days

January 2004

What She Said

She said something
On those stairs
Going down them was where
This something got said
Something short
Something you could
Carry away and lose
And still hold onto
Enough to know
It was in fact something
Right there
Right where I'm pointing
That's right, there
On those stairs
That's where she said it,
Said that something

January 2004

Walk with Me

Tell me what you would have me buy.
Is it meat? Is it bread?
Where is the valley I can go for these things?
Will you lead me?
Will the wolves not break my skin
With their stained teeth?
What is this cloud above my head
And why did you put it there?

For a long time I have been listening
To the song of the sparrow.
For a long time it has been dying.
It does not feed me anymore.

I am hungry.
I have no teeth with which to eat.
Once I was full of my own accomplishment.
Where has it gone?

The valley has emeralds.
It has minks and pearls.
It has star-studded walkways
And a giant in its midst.
It has fish from the seven seas
Consumed by those
Who eat by themselves in cafés.

Somewhere it has my mother,
Starved and penitent.
In the quiet does she talk to God
And tell him of her pain.
Concern shows on his face
And his hand is busy
With the notes he must take.
About me she tells him,
The things I have done and left undone.

“My son is a good boy. He is not
Always right in his head.
He thinks the animals are following him
When they have problems of their own.
He has killed his father
And wanders the earth alone.
He wants to lie down

But endlessly walks his shadowed path.”

I am here at the water’s edge.
I am waiting for a ship.
It flies its own flag, that of oblivion,
Somewhere over the horizon.
I am waiting for a bird.
It has disappeared.

I am waiting for a child
Who has lost his mother.
He is somewhere in the forest,
Where beasts sup on his flesh.
I am waiting for the ocean
To tell me what it knows.

February 2004

Tree

She wrote to me about the tree
In her own backyard, how someone
Felled it in the night.
In Brooklyn this was,

Where she lives in a building
I have never seen.
She used the word *beneficent*.
She applied it to the tree.

Outside my door a man appeared
Wearing the face of an owl.
I saw an owl once, on TV,
How it devoured a field mouse

And returned its remains
As a compacted ball to the earth.
“Are you my tree? Are you my mouse?”
The man said to me.

On the street was someone bound
To his newspaper, with no one
Offering to free him.

“There are too many things for one person
To handle,” said the clock on the corner.
“You are the prisoner of your own state of
mind,” a passerby replied.

On a bench in the park I sat and listened.
“You of the earth, let no one cut you down either,”
The rose bushes could be heard to whisper.
“Yes,” I said back. Just yes and yes and yes.

June 2004

Top Floor

Men who live alone and come
From long-term slavery that demands
The confiscation of their manhood.
Other men in perpetual motion

With the bags they tote
And still other men whose lives
Depend on the leashes they hold.
Those who eat only the rice

And beans of the restaurant
Down a most dangerous street.

Bald men.
Fat men.

Men with a slow gait.
Men who cry in the dark
For something lost
They cannot name.

Men as wild boars
And sheets of green grass
As my only shield from them in a dream
That would free me from the night.

January 2004

The Visit

I thought to hide the photos of my niece
And other nephew before you came,
Concerned about that jealous side
You sometimes show but heard
A voice say let things fall the way
They will. All that jabbering of yours
About the price of medications and how
You threatened to call the police on
The local pharmacist for slipping
You a generic brand. You were nervous.
You'd never been to my place alone.
You surprised me at the end, that stuff
About the last days and Jesus is coming.
I could have been listening to Mother,
But she is gone and Daddy and Esther
And Ruth and Paul as well. It's just you and me now,
And that son of yours you didn't speak about,
Living with you in that apartment where we
Were born and raised, and which you never left.

June 2004

Therapist of Mine

Just inside her front door she sits with me
In this apartment where she eats the dinners
Of the recently divorced and plays the piano
With amateurish delight and reads from the books
Piled on her coffee table. Later, when she has
done with me, I walk through the park.
The murderers are everywhere, hanging out
In trees from which they leap with sharpened
Knives, intent on crossing the line once again.
Nearby, a museum, its doors closed for the night,
Listens for new arrivals in this city I cannot do without.

November 2003

The Park

Across the park was a place
I was told that I could go,
Where people read from the work
They had made with the words
That had come to them.

Hard ice, dirty ice,
There on the transverse,
The cars staying with the route
That had been set out for them.,

White lights,
Then the red lights, sexy,
A trail of mockery in their wake.
All my life afraid of that park

Where I could only play in the safety
Of the light,
Forgetting for the moment
My vandal's touch,

Snowballs lobbed at the heads
Of the lamps,
Bringing on the darkness
I knew to fear.

February 2004

The Mayor Speaks

I just wanted to stop by
And say hello
To congratulate you
On your success and
Let me say further
It's not every day
We have a success
So worthy of congratulation.
No one deserves it more
And I know I speak for everyone
In adding that it couldn't
Have happened to a nicer person.
I've seen all the
Hard work you do
And have been
A fan of yours
For a long long time.
Believe me when I say
I have always held you
In the highest regard
And so I welcome this opportunity
To stop by on my way
To my other stopping bys
And personally thank you
And yes, of course I know
It's been a while, but really,
There is some pressing business
And I do have people waiting
And a stop by is a stop by
And if you would please
Not take this further
Than it needs to go.
I really would appreciate
Some communication here
As to what you don't comprehend
About the words stop and by
Because I am slowly
Losing patience
And don't say I didn't
Warn you or give you
ample opportunity
Because now you've done it
Now you've really done it
Now you'll just have to

Pay and pay
For drawing out this
Stopping by
When all I wanted to do
Was just stop by

February 2004

The Building

The extractor was my aunt's idea.
A cylinder of stainless steel to wring
All excess from the sopping linen.
Round and round went the perforated tub,
Straining its resources as it spun.

My aunt was thin. She had a lantern jaw
And sang to my mother
In their native tongue.

We managed the building.
In fact it managed us.
The tenants needed things
And were quick to ask:

A new fuse to dispel the darkness
That had come,
Strong spray for the roaches
That were defeating their life.

Spinning us dry in their cycles
Of desire.

August 2003

The Drinking Life

Hey, you, Federale, you talking to *me*?
You want more trouble
Than you can *handle*?

The picture kind of fuzzy,
But we did see someone's teeth
Fly across the room,

Daisy taking it as a cue
To toss her underwear collection
Out the window.

Filing cabinets followed. We attacked
The baby grand with power tools
And flung that as well.

The bed was next,
For its years
Of obsequiousness.

Sometime before daybreak
We drilled our way into
The neighbors' place below.

Smack dab we fell
into the middle
Of their night.

Angels of mercy soon arrived.
These we knew how to
Deal with, too.

September 2003

The Calling

She'll fall asleep
Thinking of him,
What he said, how he looked
And the significance of the word

Nimble as he applied it to her mind.
A delicate word that withstood
The rush and roar of the subway
Train tearing into the tired station.

It was summer after all,
The heat controlling public spaces.

On the street the buildings
Stood their ground,
Bore witness to fuming cars unable
To break from the established pattern

Of stop and go,
Stop and go.
A highway only of the heart for them
Within the city limits.

August 2004

Tell Me

Yesterday I sequestered a child
And gave him my life story.
To a stranger on the street
I professed undying love.
To my adamant foe I yielded
A dark and painful secret.

Finally alone, I can confide
This to you now.

August 2004

Subway Woman

Are you sinister in your intent?
How do you come, like an incendiary device,
To set fire to the flesh?

I saw a painting of you in Venice.
Out of some museum you walked and now are
Freed from the cover of books as well.

The way to work involves long blocks,
None of which has eternity in its plan.
And yet vision can be at play

On the field of limitation,
Has things to say about the demographically tested
Slants of a particular face, has proclaiming chords

To strike as to where a focus on the body leads
And the specific address where spirit
Can be counted on to be waiting in the wings.

Just so you know what the morning can bring,
Subway woman, Just so you know.

October 2003

Stranger

As I step onto the landing you ask me
What it is I do, a thing you haven't
Previously asked in the twenty years
I have been coming from my apartment

Out onto the landing and so I tell you
How it was for my mother standing
On the landing in a robe of glowing whiteness
As men emerged through different doors

Onto the same landing and knelt in worship
In a circle around her and how she didn't like it,
Didn't like it at all, this being a dream
She shared with me in the long ago,

And promising you that tomorrow, should we meet
On the landing, I will have for you a dream of my own.

January 2004

State of the Nation

The president loiters between columns
Wearing a suit that holds to no one color,
His policies banding his head like rotting fruit
And the whole world contained in his one good ear.

Elsewhere Philomena is learning ballet.
See her now pli  and hear the crack of a rifle
That sends a bullet between her parted legs.

Oh life that was supposed to be with us evermore.

August 2004

Stairs

The stairs were for coming down.
So my father, at the bottom, told me.
I took them slowly,
Pulled by his stricken face,
The stairs themselves
Promising a safe journey.
Liars, liars, every last one.

December 2003

Speak

You asked me a question.
You asked with urgency
If the man could speak.
You said it was a matter
Of great importance.
You said so with your words
And with your face.

There were other men
In the room,
Men who had known
Only silence too.

A question for you,
If I may.

Look in the mirror
And see what
You need to see
And tell me
With your face alone
When next we meet.

August 2004

Journal Entry

I am a small man.
I am a petty man.
I am a vicious man.

So I read somewhere, sometime ago.

Today, some creature with a malignant face
Frightens me with his oedipal mantra
And the persistence of a gnawing rat that he displays.
Still, there was no call to tell him he was loathsome in the eyes
Of the many and the select few.

Tonight, though, tonight, there will be walking and parted
Thighs following a sunset of dripping honey. A call to adventure
Will sound in your inner ear. Tonight there will be explosions
To make the body quiver in a darkness destined to stay awhile.

August 2004

Sleeping Alone

I wanted her to love me but she had
A fish in her bag and then lit
A cigarette with an apology that lingered
Longer than the smoke. This was on West
Seventy-third and Columbus
Outside a bank where some drunks
Had clustered to talk about God, how
He lives in us and through us and what
The miracle of his power means in our
Lives that we are not soused at 7 p.m.
On a Thursday evening in early June.

I wanted to tell her that the street
Is a happy one for me, that I have
A notion beyond the contours of rhyme
Or reason I may have been born in
A hospital nearby and long since razed
but it was just as well I didn't because
She might have suggested I check the facts
So I could have it straight in my mind when in fact
it was straight in my mind as a source of happiness
That such an event could have transpired
On this block where we now stood.

But also how you can be looking in a store window
As I was later, saying if only I could have that stick
Of furniture I'd be happy forever, this kind of thought
Coming up more than once in a person's life
In the random flow of mental event with the power
To dog you late into the night and wait for you in
The day that follows and bring you back
To the source so the purchase can be made
And your new life can begin.

But really, that fish, that stinky, stinky fish.

June 2004

Sister

The time you called to him
To straighten me out
And the look of gloating
You showed me after
He had vanquished the vanquished.
That you could say mine, mine
He's all mine
That you could say years later
I feel it's for me to carry on his name
And place me in some neutered space
In your pasture for the invisible.
That you could say that.

January 2004

Sighting

The dwarf sitting curbside
With his sleeves rolled up.
Pooped. Fatigué. Afflicted with a thirst
the open hydrants cannot quench.

The president addressing him
In no uncertain terms.
Dad blast it. By gum.
Enough of your guff.

Like a prancing horse the dwarf
jumps up and makes,
singing a silly-sounding "Dixie "
from deep within his barrel chest.

From his window Federico monitors
These events and tries to add the missing
Sound with notes plucked from the strings of his guitar
To soften the unfriendly night.

A throb in a tooth not even there. Intimacy with
A mattress on which he has slept alone for years.
The dusty reality of a teddy bear from a forever love.
Manuscripts born without legs.

"Treat him with respect,
Respect,"
He shouts,
When the music clearly fails.

The dwarf now hanging from high on a lamppost.
The president in the bent posture his age has imposed.
The two of them knowing
To look up, up.

December 2003

Shirt

Are you wearing a new shirt?

Yes I am. I bought it off the rack
In the tranquility of mid-afternoon.

What was it about the shirt you liked?

The color did not shout,
The fabric was soft and yielding,
No design element had run amok
Upon its simple surface.

Can you tell us more?

I had the sense the shirt would not leave me lonely
But stand with me through my days.
I had the sense it had been quietly waiting
For the store to clear
So it could make its presence felt.

*Where are you in your life that you can speak so
of a shirt?*

I am in the place of joyful solitude
And daily walk within a concrete pasture.
I am with brothers and sisters who know me not
And yet are one with me as I am with them.
I am with the jaundiced eye and the lecher's tongue
And the scrofulous seedlings in my own thought patterns.
I am here in New York City, where I was born to live and die.

March 2004

Sister of Mine

Ruth (may I be so personal as to use your name?
For years and for a fictional purpose, I called you
Rachel, though no one labored for your hand).
You were the elusive one, the one always leaving
As I entered the room, your “bye” a kind of bullet
To the chest, as if you could love God and not people.
Bye, a one-word way of saying everything you felt.
What was it to spend your life that way, your signature
Expression a smirk and every word with a razor attached?
What was it to live life as a blister? Was it not lonely?

Every year I get a better grasp of who you were.
I want you to know that, SRO death woman.
I want you to know. I have no big attachment to you,
You who were age twelve when I entered the world.
(Was it true you had to be kept from me as an infant?
I’m told you did things, that you had a torturing intent.)

Something about your teenage life astonishes me still.
That sea of books, piled like breaking waves,
The floor of your room had become. How did you live
With such disorder? Was it simply your state of mind?

Other memories too: your long, thick braid
And the stack of texts cradled against your chest
As you mounted the stairs. You held those books
As if they were your life, the only things
With access to your heart.

One day your room fell empty. Vassar College
Took you in. Imagine that, a sister out in the world,
Beyond the reach of the fire breathers at the downtown
Church. The tunnel where I played a pathway to you,
Somewhere to the north, the freights rumbling through
Conveying me along the river and past the thick stretches
Of trees into that privileged world of light you had entered.
Ruth, you were a beacon. You had escaped the Pentecostal
Admonitions against life, the flames of hell burning hotter
Than gasoline. You would have nothing to do with the gnashing
Of teeth. You would not be slain by the word *worldly*
From the mouths of your accusers, the ones who slapped
the guilt-edged pages of their Bibles as they fulminated.

You knew they were indulging in the sad rituals
Of superstition-saddled children. I had heard your
Worldliness from childhood and thrilled to it.
All my life I have loved the sound of women singing,
As you sang “Hard-Hearted Hannah” and
“I’m Going to Wash That Man Right out of My Hair”
And all the Broadway show tunes you sought to master.

Saying, “And what do you want to be when you grow up?”
“A skin diver,” my fumbling answer came. “Aren’t all men
Skin divers?” you replied, shaming me with your smirking truth.

The living room you said that in. Linoleum in place of a carpet.
A bed made into a sofa. Lemon cake, moist and tart, from
Party Cake. Birthdays recorded in black and white.

What happened, Ruth? What ailed you, as Mother used to say?
What caused you, home from college in your freshman year,
To push her backward into the Christmas tree as she rushed
To greet you at the door? Broken ornaments, crushed gifts,
Father streaking to the scene with raised hand as an annihilating
Instrument and you fleeing out the door before he could
Wreak vengeance on your pale flesh. Were you seeking
To punish her for the crime of letting you go?
(Would it please you to know I cried that evening,
And pledged to be as good for Mother as you were bad?)
And why did you leave college only days before your
Graduation? Was it your debilitating pride that took you
Away, your failure to graduate with honors, the men who
Didn’t want you while claiming others for their 1950s own?

You were seen crying in the lobby in this period,
There in Mother’s arms.
The floodgates had opened on your terrible pain.
A man had shown an interest and then had left you.
For that moment you allowed her close,
Allowed human contact and human touch to be established.
You were within the fold, if only temporarily.

Then you were gone again. You adopted a new pose.
The braid replaced with a provocative duck’s ass.
Your hennaed hair seemed to grow fins sharp
To the touch. Hair to express your mocking stance.
Dark sunglasses, I can see you but you can’t see me,

A kind of facial armor. Weaponized, you wrapped
Yourself in a purple full-length coat, a staple
Of your dress in summer heat as well as winter cold.

Whatever, you were alone,
On the street,
In that room,
In your life.

You got jobs and left jobs. I heard the name CBS
And my heart lifted. I saw you connected to the glories
Of television and the world. I was proud of you, Ruth.
You provided hope. But then you quit. Someone said
It was your boss and the torment it brought to be near him.
Lesser jobs followed, about which you did not speak.

You lived your life in hotels for transients. You ate
Standing up at hot dog stands. Five-minute meals in
Midtown amid strangers with unclean hands running
Paper napkins across their greasy mouths. You broke
The seal on bottle and drank in your room. The world
Perplexed you. It had no place for your pain. When you
Had drunk enough it turned you toward home. You flew
Into the apartment shrieking at Mother only to collapse in her arms.
Your ritual act of the night, and when you needed something more,
You ran drunk and naked down Broadway shouting your love
For John F. Kennedy only to pass out between parked cars.

Bellevue. Manhattan State. Rockland State. Institutions such as
These, with their numbing drugs and trespassing staffs,
Became your home away from home. Then Father died. His passing
Shot a bolt through you. It entered at your feet and lodged in your brain.
The liquor had no choice but to flee. No one explored the psychic mystery.
It was just there. The sunglasses flew off, as did the coat, and your hair
Returned to its sandy color. Now in your mid-twenties, you were without
A means of support. Mother took you in, gave you back your room.
The sea of books gone now. Only the one book. The good book,
The wandering tribes, the stiff-necked people. The rocks and desolation
of mystical history. You were there with the Canaanites and the Hittites
And the Ishmaelites. Ezekiel bound you to his truth
And then it was the fulminating prophets before you broke free
Into the Jesus terrain of the Gospels. But really, it was your childhood
You were seeking to reclaim as you hit thirty and thirty-five
And appeared on the streets in shapeless dresses from the Goodwill bag
And gunboat sneakers sizes too large for your blistered feet.

Your face scrubbed clean of war paint. You had let go
Of the world by then, not needing to ask if it had let go of you,
And became a fixture at the Chock Full O' Nuts across from
Columbia at One Hundred Sixteenth and Broadway. You sat there
In the early afternoon having your first food of the day.
Do you remember, you with your powdered doughnuts
And a mug of heavenly coffee? It was a place for you to share
With people beyond your single room, though by then you had found
The space within you where you had to dwell. There was
Your great reality. On Sundays you returned to the Pentecostal
Tabernacle from which in your youth you had fled. The pastor
At the pulpit slapping his open Bible and launching his torrent
Of disappearing words. The church falling down around him
And the diminished congregation of diverse colors and tongues.
When Mother was well enough, she came with you. Otherwise,
You sat alone. Your nights were spoken for. You had the job
Of scanning the dark sky for signs of Jesus. You wanted to be
Ready when he came. You knew he had eyes only for you.
Politics and literature and all such interests had fallen away. God as
The extreme purgative, the relentless application of Him to your life.

Ruth, we have traveled this terrain before: the emergency room
Appearances and complaints to the interns that rat poison was burning
A hole in your stomach. And there were the taps in Mother's apartment
You turned on but never off, the journeys out onto the window ledge,
Believing you had heard your Lord, calling, calling, in the rushing wind
Over Manhattan. When the authorities came and took you away
For another hospital stay, Mother held your college mug
And spoke of your fine mind and all your promise and wondered
Where it was she had gone wrong. "All day as a child she would
Follow me around from room to room, Stand behind me without
So much as a word. What was I to do?" Toward the end the way
You had of placing your hands around her neck in a not so friendly
Fashion, Mother saying, "I cannot have this. I cannot have this at all."

Ruth, you died soon after Mother died, though you died when she
Passed on. Your absence from her burial did not concern me greatly.
Had I given my consent for you to take the pills that left you comatose
On the floor of your plain room? Did I know that without her you were done?
In the ambulance, my indifference to the paramedics trying to work their
Medical magic and bring you back, you who had chosen life in death
To death in life. You went, Ruth, you went. You flew past the IVs
And the scanners. You took your leave from Ward Six and Dr. Alberstrom
And his white-garbed flock of protégés. You laughed at holding on when
All you wanted was to let go. You got to say your final bye so loud and clear.

Let's say you're in a room and I am with you. Let's say the feeling
Is we've closed the door and now are sitting for a while.

June 2004

Room

I am in a room with walls of white
Where the women look elsewhere,
Having seen that I am old
And adrift in the vagueness
Of my mind.

I am in a room with walls of red
Where the women are spent
And the men are spent
And words are treated as
The currency of the generous.

I am in a room of smoldering ruins
Where giant butterflies flutter
And a child half dressed
Sings listlessly as she drags
Her blood-drenched doll.

I am in a room where men and women
Eat the word *prevarication*
With a knife and fork and munch on other
Concoctions of their imaginings.
I am in that room for now.

May 2004

Ride

Jazz on the radio too sweet to talk over.
We've been driving like this for hours,
Here in the dark. Before you know it
We're at Grant's Tomb.
Some things you keep to yourself.
The cherry vanilla coke.
The girl on Dead Man's Hill.
The railroad tunnel of your youth.
The sound a wall can make
As it separates you from your own.

December 2003

Reading at the 92nd Street Y

Lady, your poems are loathsome to me.
Your self-importance and the conspiracy
Of wills by which you achieve your fame—
These too equally, equally loathsome.
You throw out a word and the woman
Across the aisle slobbers and nods
Her head in vigorous assent
As she devours it, a twitching seal gulping
Her meal of rotten fish.

I asked a woman to come with me.
She said no.
I asked another woman to come with me.
She too said no.
I am here alone, lady,
In the dark,
Tearing up the extra ticket
I did not use.

In my walk-in closet sits a ship-captain's desk.
I will place it by the front door
So I can hear my neighbors
On the landing even as I write,
This the level of intimacy
I am seeking to achieve.

Lady, as I was leaving
A woman looked at me,
A calculator in her hand,
To gauge her level of interest.
Not many do anymore.
Out into the night I walked and walked,
Taking her face with me.
The moon was well hidden,
The lights in windows few.

Long ago and somewhere nearby
A woman invited me to her home.
She wanted to kiss,
Having known darker streets
And what it was to be beaten
Into unconsciousness in a pimp's
Unyielding care.

A test she gave me,
To properly set out
The knives and forks and spoons,
And showed me to the door
On seeing I had failed.

What is this solitary pose
That is no pose,
This detachment that sees limitations
While seeking to rise above them?
What is this earth that has
Allowed me to visit
If only for a while
And this feeling that leads me to say,
Oh lady of the fleeting look,
You too were here on this same night,
And now we're gone?

April 2004

And Then

Once I rode a bus painted silver and green
Away from the city and into a park
Where marshmallows and franks
Were speared on sticks and held
Over a fire of burning wood
That spit and crackled. Heaven was
In the daylight run we children made
Amid the wonder of our breath
And the red Keds in which I sped.

But now is the concierge praying
And the head of the security guard
Is bowed in prayer
And upstairs Hermione Grungold's
Eyes are closed to the clutter on her desk.

In all the cubicle spaces of the org.
Are people praying,: Sonia Rusalya
And Abednego Jones and Dmitri Duncan
And Suki Joster and Cameron Softwind
And Agnes Gant and Buford Reheboth
and Alcibiades Malincourt and Fortay Plenty
And Luster Luther and Sacred Waterfall the Third.

At all hours of the day silence envelops the org.
"Prayer is an action, too," only the walls
Are allowed to whisper.

April 2004

Park

People get restless.
They have a right to be.
The trees are calling,
Fragile honey locusts and sturdy oaks
And the smell of freshly mown grass
That lingers in our senses.
Crazy Beth speeds along with Baby
Alice half out of her stroller
And there is Fred with his wandering dog
And a woman without child eating
Ice cream off a stick
And skateboard Sammy looking to knock
An old man down.
You sit here because you just passed
The house where young love died.
You don't live there anymore
And she doesn't either.

May 2004

Once Again

Pause at the shaded site,
A respite from the burning light.
Rest there in sweet safety.
You have found it again,
The living room
Of that childhood apartment,
The afternoon quiet
Before the grownups are home.

September 2003

Note to a Friend

Heat and humidity are good for corn
But not for people, the woman from
Illinois says. She has legions
On her payroll and battalions in her bag.
Of her blond hair and cold gaze
You don't know what to make,
Never having visited the Midwest
And not slated to any time soon.
It is your understanding that women
From those parts more readily mate
While the island of Manhattan features
The unspeakable in full pursuit of the unavailable.
Your problem is a small one if only you would laugh.
The women you don't want you seek to please
So they won't kill you while you're hurt by the rest
For spurning you. Some great classical recordings
Await if you'll only find the time to listen.

July 2004

Nominee

About the dreams of yesterday and today
We can safely say there is no need to dismiss
Their mimicry of reality as we note the sorrow
In the eyes of the man who would be president
And the anger in his teeth as we ate a bowl of chips
And watched him on TV. Oh, the tears we shed
Over a country abducted and his vow to keep it that way
Before withdrawing to our single bed where sleep
Eluded us, at first light the radio reporting
What we had heard and approaching it
From angles we hadn't thought of until juiced
By the commentator's word storm we spoke our truth:
We are small overall but large in the secret places
That we go and here declare our candidacy for
The presidency of the United States of America:
Wife beater and philanderer, pornographer and pedophile,
Welfare cheat and scofflaw, our hat is in the ring.

July 2004

Night Walk

Doctors in white coats
Clutch bloody knives,
Their time for smiling
Having passed.
Men in suits are out
In force as well,
Their primary purpose
To prostitute the air.
Many in the restaurant
Cling to seitan stew
And burdock root.
Somewhere a train whistle
In a city without tracks.
Even the rats put down
Their glasses and
Cup their ears to hear.

October 2003

Doctor, Please

What does it mean
For you to live in me like this,
To walk out of my life,
And have no means
To find you?

What is this word *longing*
And this other one *bereft*?

I would stand by windows and by doors
And on street corners at all hours.
I would swim oceans at full turbulence
For the chance to see you again.
How, then, did I let you go?

And how did you know to enter as you did,
The questions to pose and the silence to practice
And the age to be that made of us a pair?
Is it so much to ask how you can leave
And I should remain?

This morning I woke free of thoughts of you
And then they found me.
I am praying now for rain and snow and sleet,
For a new ice age soon to be upon us
In which these feelings too may be frozen.

2003

Murder

I was not the criminal.
He was somewhere else.
Still, I was among people who knew enough
To look and listen and hold the scales of justice
In their palsied hands.

The courthouse clock was a marvel of stability,
Its hands unmoving the livelong day.
Down below Frankie got himself stabbed in the rain
While Johnny drank Sterno straight from the can.

“I will kill you all,” he stood and shouted.

“When you rise to the level of your own deceit,
You better just sit yourself down again,”
The assembled shouted back,
Summoning a strength that was not their own.

September 2003

Men

White shirts..
Thick suspenders.
Ties pulled tight.

Hair ready
For the day.

The forward motion
Of the commuter train
So quiet on the straightaway.

Later, a sighting.

“They’re coming back,”
Tillie says.
“Get down. *Now.*”

Wheels savage
On hard-pressed rails
A farthing from our heads.

December 2003

Lunch Hour

I'm here at work
On my lunch hour
Typing what I have seen
And felt and heard,
Trying to throw a net
Over a short span of time.

Ed wants to take mescaline.
He got the idea from some book.
Ed writes haikus. His latest
Is about chairs taken away
From old men and given
To the young.

(PS—Ed himself is old.)

Now the phone rings. The caller is someone
Who doesn't want me in the way that I want her.

Now I am checking the air fares to Florida.
My sister-in-law has a spare bedroom.
My brother is dead. Is this a problem?

Now I am writing last night's dream
Of a penis growing out of my knee
With the firmness of a wilted stalk.

Now I am eating.
Peanut butter and pita bread and an orange.
An unvaried diet for the last few days.
Counting the pennies so things
Don't fly apart.

November 24, 2003

Waiting

I'm missing you.
The sound of your breath,
The softness you've taken away.
Come back. Come back, I say.

I ate peanut butter today,
Four spoonfuls when I meant to have two.
Your fault, I'm sure, men exceeding their limit
At the mention of your name.

What is it about a sheep bound for slaughter
That excites your blood? What is this
Frequented space reserved for sharpened knives?
What is this slow death you torment me with?

"Anna, I am too old," I say.
You laugh. I see the red stains
On your sharpened teeth
And do not care.

February 2004

You

I'm afraid of you.
I need for you to leave.
I don't want you.
You are too needy.
Too angry.
I've had enough of your guilt.
I've had enough of your hand out.
I'm a Republican.
I've been a Republican all along.
The Republic for which we stand.
There. I said it.
You got what you deserved.
You earned your pain.
It's the only thing you've earned.
Go away now,
Go away, I said.
Let me eat in peace, for Christ's sake.
He would have hated you too.
You would have tried his patience as well.
One more minute and I'll have the police on you.
Force is the only thing you respect.
You want it, you're going to get it.
Don't say I didn't warn you.
I'm sick of your kind.
This has been building for a long long time.
Don't ask me for a thing.
Not one thing.
Hunt him down. Destroy the very sight of him.
That's what I will tell them.
I've been waiting all my life to tell them.
You're going to pay, mister.
You're really going to pay.
You mark my words.

June 2004

Listening

Down the hall from this office
Of riotous laughter
Pain is sunk
Deep in the chests
Of those
Who partner with walls
That they may lie down
With the silence
Make love to the silence
Fall in with the silence

January 2004

Book Report

Momma did not shoot Abraham Lincoln.
She did not abduct him into the slavery
He would free others from. She just saw his
Photograph and fell in love because
Her father was a boy in Sweden while
Abe was going on.
History is not a muzzle on the mouth.
It has room for the succinct *and* the lonely.

Momma loved the kindly power of his face
And the way his hair sought to couple with
The eternal. She didn't have to slide in the mud
Of Pennsylvania Avenue or hear the distractions
A carriage could bring to know he had wisdom
Surpassing the bayonets he had launched
Or the oratory he had mastered was more
Than the totality of his penetrated head.

She just had to understand the words
Hallowed ground
Insofar as they concerned the country
Where she had not been born and
The fearful distance she had swum
Solely to arrive as Momma
On the shores of a new continent,
A stovepipe hat laughing on her own battered head.

October 2003

East Side, West Side

There are things I could buy with the money I give you.
I will tell her this meaningless truth as she listens
With an ear I cannot see
And maintains her power to bind me.

I will tell her the woman's answer was no
And of the reprieve I received from robbing
The cradle and the danger zone we enter
When moving beyond generational lines

And of the strange city I plan to walk in
Where desolation will greet me around every
Corner when finally I am away from her.
This she will learn when I enter through her front door.

May 2004

Give It Up

The doctor gave me back my knee.
He coughed it up reluctantly
And put his knife back down.
I walked along city blocks with my own cast of characters,
Nodded to policemen without provoking gunfire,
Noted street signs and stayed within their vigilance,
Kept to a straight course, going east to west,
Placed my hands in my pockets, then took them out,
Saw a museum asleep for the night,
The paintings crying
While statues with penises mocked their tears,
Found the park that has always found me.
There on a bench
We talked about old times.

October 2003

Job Market

Is something on your mind?

My boss asked me to do something good.
I put fibers of my being into the thing
And could not sleep till it was done.

Who is your boss and what is her name?

She is a wind out of Texas,
A force of her own creation,
With legs like thick oaks
And a girth that encompasses the world.
Her name is Bellatrice and she is my faux mother.

And where are you now?

I am in the pain it was mine to find.
I am in the unbearable closeness
The finished deed has wrought.
She has praised me in a way
That offers only the toxic as its benefit.

Can you explain?

I am in the room my mother would call me to
When childhood was mine.
I am in the place of apartness where we lived
Behind the locked door
With meadows in the distance
And the fumes of the city closer at hand.
I am in parks and in towns
And on streets without names
But always I am with her
In the goodness mode
She established as a vibrating presence
In my internal apparatus.

Will you be all right? Should we call for assistance?

I will be one with myself
When my bearings
Are dissolved from her person
And I can open the door now closed
And walk to a destination I'm not sure of.

Describe it for us. Try.

It has a high cliff and foaming sea
And places to sit with warm tea.

It has boulevards where the old
Who lack provisions
Are blown about
On icy streets
By winds of winter.
It has the turbulence of depths
And the superficial majesty of heights.
It has paths that come to an end
But leave you in sight of others,
Stray newspapers everyone
In the fall of his life must read,
And cosmopolitan offerings
That will leave you speechless with ennui.
Mostly it has prayer every hour on the hour,
The exhortation driven by desperation
To fall on your knees and enter the inner spaces
Where your only hope is to be found.

July 2004

January 12, 2004

I forgot to tell you about Donovan
The harsh and mocking attitude
Dylan displayed toward him.
Donovan sang him a sweet song
But then Dylan sang him a great song
Full of American complexity
(No, I don't remember the lyrics)
And the camera was on Donovan's face
For at least part of the time—
Enough to reconnoiter his smiling distress.
I was worried for Donovan, pained for Donovan.
It felt like Donovan was getting run over
By an express and would he live?
But that was 1965 and then I remembered
1967 and having my own room
And playing Donovan, yes Donovan,
Something called "Wear Your Hair Like Heaven,"
So clearly he got to live beyond
The blow that he had taken.

You of course weren't in my life back then.
Sarah was going off to Europe
And I was fearful, not knowing where
To turn with the pain like a wind rushing
Through the nerve-rich hole that her departure exposed.
I lost the room and sat on the stone steps
Of a church without a thought of going in.
I remember a newsstand with a light in it
And the way it stood out there in the dark
And the smell of the air through
The sidewalk vents as the subway rushed past,
The way I did a lot of rushing past
The person I really was in that
Drawn out state of desperate need.

January 2004

January 11, 2004

Celeste, last night arrived like a warrior
Full of the spunk of youth.
Words were sparking in the dark
And lovers who didn't believe they had it
In them actualized their own potential,
Protesters thronged the halls of justice,
Some going away deranged.

The video was called *Don't Look Back*,
From which you were protected
By your classical grounding.
Even this morning I bear the pain of it,
Dylan's angel beauty augmented
By his words of fire.

I want to tell you so much but where to begin?
The New Yorker Theater down the block
was where I saw it first.
A Food Emporium stands there now
(Waxed apples and taste-free tomatoes
And meats that are not for me)
Or maybe it was the next block down.
Sarah was with me, an artist
Who did look back and offered
wrathful bile, saying
He's a genius a genius
You'll never be anything
You're not even smart
All you have is your sensitivity
As we returned to her parents'
Four-bedroom apartment
Along Riverside Drive.

They are gone, the apartment
And the second home they owned
Given up to strangers.
A card came from Sarah
Over Christmas in the block letters
Of her children's hand informing me
Of her welfare status and the tissues
In her ears to shield her from
The vipers on the tongues raucous kids
Determined to torment her days.

Oh Celeste, you should know this too,
That the phone rang far into this night
That the moon had spurned
And I was there to answer a man-child
All alone saying he wanted to drink
And drink himself into an eternity
That glowed with his own promise fulfilled
So he could be the brightest star in the firmament
And was able to love him with my own understanding,
Suggesting he pray for half the time that we had been
On the line and access his own true divinity
And in so doing mere with the larger entity,
They becoming us and we becoming them.

Celeste, let this be a record of where things stand
Before they shift again so you don't ever
Lose sight of me in the space you allotted me to have.

January 2004

In the Dark

Celeste, last night here at home
The Fugitive. A real thriller.
I ate as much as I could from the big bag
Of popcorn before putting it down,
Then had the pea soup from the organic food store
On the corner. That's the thing about Manhattan.
Things are at hand. But the question in the movie
Was whether justice was at hand or all hope of it
Would disappear like the fugitive freedom Harrison Ford
Was seeking to preserve. No one should be calumniated
By the state for things he has not done and be made to
Live on the run from all that he holds dear. That's why
I was so glad he had Tommy Lee Jones on the case
With all that intelligence on display so you slowly
Saw him coming over to the side of Harrison Ford's
Truth. Everyone needs a champion, Celeste, everyone,
And while I'd like to dwell on rocks and flowers
As well as things unseen upon the earth
Except in the gossamer delight of someone's fancy,
I need this morning to speak from that which
Is burning within me and if you'll please
Bear with me as I do.

I know there were spiritual reasons for me
To forgo a lawyer in the divorce proceeding and just sign
The papers your own lawyer presented, but it does pain me
That when I expressed some doubt the other night
For the first time in all these years as to the wisdom of my decision
You just smiled. Like a wall that smile was, sealing you in
And sealing me out. That smile said a lot, Celeste. It said a lot.

Still, don't be thinking I watched the movie for the entire night.
I saved the ending for today so I could pay attention to my brain
In starting the book you suggested I read on the Armenians.
It's not like I don't know about them. My father was one,
After all, and held the practice of his own silence dear
Except for the times he would shout, out of the blue,
"We lost everything. Everything." I do know about
Even if I do have information about these these people, Celeste,
I'm going to finish the book all the same
And ask that Tommy Lee Jones be on
That particular case as well.

January 2004

I Saw You

The stairs are there for leading you down
From where you were above the ground
And then you see they're there
For falling down, falling down.

And you, Father, calling me down
And pinning me against the wall
To ensure my distance from the platform's
Edge and the train's rushing path.

Up above a cathedral made of stone
A toothless man playing harmonica tunes
And a waif walking along in the gray light
Of a long-gone day.

January 2004

Noted

Not really about the surfer
With the California tan
Telling the mash-nosed geezer
With a stogie in his slackened mouth

And customized seat pad in his hand
He was only doing the gig short term,
The old guy recollecting how he'd said
The same thing forty years back,

Or the loneliness of the urine-streaked
Parking lot at 2 a.m.
Awaiting a rumored flight
From the Caribbean

Or what it meant
To drink with my passengers
And lose the whereabouts
Of my mind

Or the painful epiphany
Suddenly seeing through their eyes
Not an interesting guy who drove a cab
But only a hackie in the deadness of his life.

Not any of that or the sudden sense
Of doors closing in the night
But more about up close
Those lips those jeans slung low

The awful hurt
To not embrace
The place of silence
And touch and touch

December 2003

Hair

I'm fifty-six now, Celeste, and after all these years
I've taken an important step and have
Michael Douglas to thank for that—
You know, the son of the famous actor
Who has grown famous in his own right.
(And who said in one of his films
How he doesn't look into the bowl after he has
Gone potty. Said it with angry pride, as if to say
There is something wrong with those who do.)

Things run together now, Celeste. Like a ball of string
Life becomes, tightly wound so you can hold it in your hand.
Something like that. The thing is to not throw the ball away.

Anyway (that's your word, Celeste), in *Wall Street*
He takes a comb and runs it through his wet hair
With just a few strokes, combing it straight back.
Those are power strokes he is giving his locks
And a power boost he is creating for his face
So it will be in the open space for passerbys' eyes.

I'm doing the same now, Celeste.
I'm out on the street with my hair back
And full of gel and my face right there for people to see.
I'm walking along like it's time not to care:
Feeling good, feeling strong, feeling like a man
Finally should in the breeze that's blowing.

January 2004

Good

Your dream of men bowing d own
Before you in your white robe
The dust-like scent of the geraniums
We gave you for Easter
The polka dot dress you wore to church
With the ribbed linen gloves
To hide your callused hands
The tongues of the angels in which you spoke.
The women of the congregation
You called into circles around me,
To pray for the removal of demons.
The sight of you shoved backward
Into the Christmas tree by my drunk
And angry older sister and in my tears
My resolve to be better than good for you

And of course the path of righteousness
I left for the fleshpots wherever they might be.

These things recalled hearing
With the inner ear, Fred at our boss's door,
Saying "I'm a good boy.
You'll see. A very good boy."

January 2004

Friend

You called about the note
I left under your door
Before running away,

Something about a dream in which
You lay on a seedy street
Among others not quite living.

Did you wish to thank me
For taking you where I am
Or was there something more
You needed to say?

June 2004

Armenian Man

My thing fell off at Forty-seventh Street,
Out of my pants and to the ground to shatter
Like a cylinder of glass amid the rushing passersby.
A man with a matrimonial eye
Came from the jeweler's
With his beloved well in tow

To make a spectacle of my broken bits.
You may know Forty-seventh Street
And the part of Manhattan in which it lives,
Lying to the east and to the west
Within the bounds of the rings it markets
And bearing the embedded silence

Of the diamonds in its tongue.
A thing falls off when it can. Not all are made of glass.
But Forty-seventh Street is where you want
To keep that thing secure inside your pants.
My father came to this same street.
He was old and he was scared and crazy

From the fumes in some theater ruins
In his head. I told him of my loss,
And from his history he spoke his own,
Of desert burns and melon breasts blood red,
Of men who wore axes in their skulls and
Needles in the eyes of shrunken children.

Blankness dominated the sign he held,
And a typewriter displayed itself,
Promising secrets it would reveal.
As it laughed and taunted and showed
Its different sides in a wanton dance
Inches from my grasp.

September 2003

Florida

The cook flees the filthy kitchen
While on the counter an old man
Spreads photos from a time long ago
To prove that childhood had once been his.

At the rear sits a mother with her young son
And daughter waiting for Daddy to come back.
Outside, in the cool night,
An engine revs. Nostrils flaring,

The teenage waiter removes her apron,
Unclasps her thick hair.
All eyes are on her as she walks through
The door on the long legs she's been given.

December 2003

Florida 2003

A few words about you, if I may.
We met, after all, and you drew me that map
That made me fall in love and cry at the same time

That you should be so expert with your hand
Yet be there bagging groceries with your smile.
Did you know the books you could write

And the oceans you could cross
With the skill you showed?
Did you know the infection

Your laughing ways could cause
As such a creature of the sun
Ebullient in dire straits?

I wanted to award you a scholarship to Cambridge
Right then and there and have you sleep in winter beauty
With your intelligence no longer at rest

And instead drove off and lost my way
In spite of all your care.
Oh, the heartbreak of it.

January 2004

Fire

Lady, I am jealous.
The whole room tilts toward you.
Everyone slides in your direction,
Leaving me exposed as the exception.

Lady, I pledged allegiance
to those of your kind for too long.
Your laughter but a cackle
And that harsh god you hide

Behind your smile.
What does it mean
That you closed the door on
Your father all those years ago

And yet go on incessantly
About your saintly mother
With no acknowledgment
Of the spiritual imbalance?

Your admirers I want to punish
As well for the crime
That I myself committed.
Last night, in a dream,

The father I had banished
For more than half a century
Came to me. Present and real
He was, and seen.

Oh yes, it was him all right.

March 2004

Sing a Song

Cathy spreading her communicable disease
In the elevator this morning,
Ascribing to the new landlord
The desire to drive out the long-time tenants
So he can jack up the rents.
Out into the street she ran with her dog, Lulu,
Who is missing half her tail.
The subway car was full, one man
Trying to push another out the door.
Here at work it's more of the same.
Management turning the screws and a boss
Who would prefer I was not around.
Just now I saw her riding past on the black cloud
Of her personal zeitgeist. It's OK, Momma.
I'm here to deal with the task at hand.
I'm here to say I've been to this dance before.

November 2003

Event

Progression.

That's all you have to know.

Really.

1993

2001

Everything else is distraction.

Really.

Progression.

Distraction.

1993

2001

Hold it in your mind.

The whole thing.

We're sitting ducks.

That's all it is.

See the thing as it is.

See it.

So I told my friend Ed

On my way to work.

He was not there

But I told him anyway.

January 2004

Summer

He has in hand a video of *The Endless Summer*
And though it is many years since summer has been
Endless and he knows nothing of riding the waves
And lots about being a timid soul afraid of deep water,
He is not without understanding, seeing the woman
In the short skirt and see-through blouse ahead of him
On the line, what the mystique of the hero is
That causes a woman to open herself to those
Who live beyond the quotidian, sensing they will
Be there only for a while and partially at best,
The oceans calling to them even as they lie
In seeming peace in their lovers' queen-size beds.

January 2004

Departure

After leaving the crime scene
It relieved him no end
That a baby smiled back
And responded in kind to the waving motion of his arm
As he headed for a bench in the park.
There he confessed to the wind
And strollers in proximity
The problematic dysfunction of his past,
The wild flowers he had gathered only to neglect,
The buttercup angels he had failed to stroke,
The demons in winter he sought out and kissed,
The pedophilic tendencies he assigned to portions
Of mankind intent on body-slamming him in the night,
With a lunatic element egging them on,
The money stolen for the unconsciousness he was seeking,
The imagined vengeance he took with teeth sharpened by rage,
The pummeling, the gouging, the ear-splitting thunder
Of shouted pain.

Oh mother of God, who made me that I am as I am?
He cried,

A mandolin player, a foolish fool,
Putting the anguished one's words to the merry music
He could dance to.

June 2004

Closing Time

I surrender all barriers to death.
I request no further distractions:

No dancing with fearful partners
Or loud crowds with their portable devices

No fame-potential pathways to success
Or projects of any duration

Just this walk on emptied streets
And the sense I have completed something.

July 2004

Christmas 2003

The sight of you a shrapnel bomb
No body armor could contain,
Though I have launched a campaign
Of personal order, cleaning my room
With the Oreck vacuum cleaner
From the wife who followed you.

Those wadded tissues in your ears
To block out assailing voices,
The sly aspersions of the passersby
And the chanted taunts of feral children
In the vacant lots of Brooklyn,
You say.

I wasn't expecting a switchblade
In your pocket either.
There was much I didn't foresee:
Your fall from Park Avenue
To the homeless state
And me without a net to catch you.

January 2004

Celeste in June

After dinner we came upon a statue of Joan
with sword in hand and mounted on her horse.
“The age of public statuary has passed,” someone said.

“Is she brandishing her weapon or pruning a tree?”
Another asked. A car whistled a mournful tune.
Another took off blaring a crazy horn.

We had a bench on which to sit.
Something was in the air. Not a cancer necessarily
But a growth of some inevitable kind.

“I can sometimes wish I’d been read to as a child.
It might have led to something,” I said,
But by then you had gone.

June 2004

Celeste, Again

Celeste, last night a dream, not of remembered sunrise,
California bathed in a golden light and my heart
Bursting with joy at a rediscovered life,
But of you behind that flimsy door.
The Mexican man had come to me in the night
Where I slept in the small shack—you know the one,
Just down the street from the newspaper stand—
And said you were making too much noise.
You have to understand my concern.
A self-righteous woman—she had been a beauty queen
Walking on the wild side before the onset
Of her censoring condition—was sleeping right next door,
And even in her slumbering state her ire was a dark spot
Upon the consciousness of the world. Thus did I find you
(Imagine speaking this way) in the public facility,
Your body burning me with its sparks.

Things got a little tough from there.
A woman with a brain full of freedom
Took me unto her person though
In a matrimonial bond.
She lay me down on a bed across some plaza
But turned into a visible corpse,
With all the color she'd been showing
Now a final shade of white.
It was only matter of time
Before the men without love in their lives
Came for my computer.
You didn't need to be a detective
To find the point of entry,
The door knocked off its hinges
And my habitat in disarray.

Oh yes, rats were eating cheese
Inside the restaurant window,
But that's what happens
When you leave the stuff uncovered.

The thing is I still had my day
To build my foundation on.
I could go forward, have a doughnut or two,
Flash a smile here and there at the passing clouds.
Stuff is happening, Celeste,
That you could build a world upon.

November 2003

Bus

Somewhere behind me
The balls got thrown.
The boys were small.
They wore short pants.
Hardballs and softballs,
They threw them all.

The city came in view,
Tall buildings
Rising in monumental conceit.
A promise broken not to talk that way.

Someone whispered,
"I'll be your friend."
I grew quiet and stared at the grass,
Awaiting some further change.

May 2004

Daily Log

Flies were all over the book.
Maggots feasted on its entrails.
Living or dead, I threw the thing in the fire.

I'm not evil, I'm lonely, the stranger said.
He had the nerve to make the devil mad.
Into the fire he went, too.

I am on a journey. The stars at night elate me.
I am younger than I know.
I have continued past all my shame

And learned to see what it is I'm looking at.
My pockets are now turned inside out
To catch the wind.

Living beyond the level of my prosperity,
I see you up ahead and wave.

June 2004

Blue Velvet

Alone in the delicious dark.
Tree-free on Christmas Eve.
On the screen
The little pup
Lapping water
From a hose
As the young man's
Father
Lies unconscious
On the lawn.

Celeste, was that
A small detail
That grabbed you,
Indifference to the
Father,
All
Fathers?

Nineteen eighty-six.
Seventeen years ago.
Some theater
Not far from
The SoHo loft.

Your SoHo loft.
Your money.
Your car.
Your country home.

You wanted me to see
Brutality singing
In the night,
How a woman
Of great beauty
Could absorb punches
To the face,
How violence
Could take the stairs
Two at a time
And storm upon her body
To a tune she never called *love*.

You wanted me to see

What we had been about
When first I came to you
Drunk and stoned
In the night
And led you into bed,
Why it was you laughed
When I accidentally
Bent your wrist,
But I had already seen
And found it a place
Too frightening to go.

I'm here now, Celeste.
In this apartment.
My name on the lease.
My apartment.
My home.
Mine alone.

December 2003

Birthday Plus One

The sun has been shining on my kingdom
All day long, the light
growing brighter still,
Joy an infectious element
In my human mind.
Of late I have been talking
About old New York, lacking the time
For accusatory inquiries as to who left
The banana peel atop the fire alarm box,
A breathtaking scandal of red and yellow
Resulting in mass migration to the other coast.
Let us turn to autumn colors and what
They mean and what the weight
Of a fallen leaf can bring to one such as I
Sitting alone on this broken bench

Where my mother calls to me from the grave.
“Eat normal food, my son,” she says,
Directing me to the baked beans at the Automat
While my brother sleeps on a railroad track,
Daring the New York Central to infiltrate
His brain and my sister fusses with treacherous
River currents, a girl with a fine mind who,
When the spirit moves her, sings arias
From cables atop the Brooklyn Bridge.

Oh mighty borough that could break
A man’s heart with a double vowel departed from
The consonantal shore. I didn’t mean
To speak of you, but where have you gone
That you are now so large before me
With churches in my face,
My mother singing tenderly,
“And he walks with me and he talks with me,”
her voice traveling through all doors
and into the waiting street?

September 2003

America

You weren't a murderer.
You didn't identify yourself as such
With a claim to have strewn
Body parts over all fifty states
Or to pick your teeth with your winnings.

Nor did you assert your delight
In the sorrow of those left behind
To grieve or share plans
For more victims
Even as we spoke.

You just told me
You were reading a book.
"So far, so good," you said,
"And hey, have a nice day."

January 2004

Alone

Women who enter the room alone
Must show the men alone
That they themselves are not alone
So they can stay alone

So it was written in the book
Of someone's life
Throughout his years
Of being alone.

February 2004

About That Drive

Some part of me wants to live free and reckless,
With consequence only a distant shadow
On my sailing mind,
I was saying to Jake
In the macrobiotic restaurant
Where the healthy people go
(No hijiki, please, that seaweed smell
Like that of the dirty ocean
In the long-gone days of my
Coney Island childhood),
How Mike and I drove up from the city
To Gethsemane, New York,
To provide people with information
Concerning what they needed to do.
How I learned a lot from Mike,
Black and gay and infected with the virus,
Wearing shorts and a carelessly knotted tie
And a collar turned up in disregard
Of propriety's norm, this in front of a church,
Its steeple a piercing instrument of God,
And the pacifying greensward out front
Supporting the quiet rectitude of small town ways,
The word *urban* written on our faces.
How I fell in love with Mike right then and there,
This thing in me fearing the white men
Of Gethsemane would not like us
But Mike saying he had taken hours out of his day
To drive to some town to tell folks
What they were supposed to already know
And now he was supposed to worry
Whether they liked him or not?
Showing me in that instant how
In a fifty-six-year-old man the little girl
As she exists in me can live on.

August 2004

Where You Are

You're hiding.
I know you're hiding.
Your high spirits but a pose,
A defense against the presence near you.

Someone took something from you,
Made it dangerous to be seen.
Who made you go sleek and thin
And handle-less through the world?

I know his name.
It is Jehovah.
It is Father in the night.

And I know his hand, veined and hairy,
And his breath that turns
The lamb-white veil so brown.

And I know his truth,
The stainless steel chambers
Of his encompassing mind

Thrown open to reveal
the storage vault
Where he deposited you.

July 2004

Walking It Came to Me

So much going on throughout the nation.
In California a woman has lost her bag
And walks abjectly a long
And dusty road to nowhere.
The kids back home scraping the mayo jar
With a noisy spoon
And the husband unshaven.
All he's good for is beer
For breakfast and berating her.
I don't know what to do about this woman.
I am in Central Park watching a grown man
Fly a kite and young girls
with chains around their necks
Running free.

November 2004

Walk

A woman averts her eyes when her beauty has been seen.
A man is busy buying ties (he has several in hand).
A woman rides the carousel while her child stands by.
A man writes his obituary while selling clocks.
A woman notes the flow of traffic and its will to never cease.
A man says he holds darkness in one hand and truth in the other,
Then bites the knuckles of both to show who is boss.
A woman grows fearful that she has no real regard for others,
Remembering the prune Danish she stole as she steps off a curb.

A dog runs up the avenue speaking in tongues (its tie is red).

Tonight I want to be with her.
I have simply had enough.

November 2004

Thoughts in the Dark

Not even secrecy must find me, here where
I am so well hidden. Tonight, a man with dire
Warning bells on his foreign breath will call.

His old soul will speak of melon breasts
And sharpened knives and the bric-a-brac show
Of broken bones on blood-absorbent roads.

I will tax him with my native tongue
And offer retaliatory gifts,
A baseball glove stiff from childhood

And anointment of his head with linseed oil
From the ruins of an empty bucket.
I will tell him to flee before he can arrive.

November 2004

The Presence

Go away.
I don't want you standing here.

You make the pages of my book
Go suddenly blank.

I cannot afford the hidden cost
Of this desire:

Your paralyzing breasts,
The unspeakable genius of your knees,

The blood you would draw
From an emptied account.

August 2004

Woman in the Dunes

An amateur entomologist directed down
The dune on a ladder to the hidden house.
Are you surprised to learn a woman
Was waiting there below?
Need you also be told
Her look was plain, of a kind ignored,
Only now it couldn't be,

That studying was in order,
When he could come to it?
A face as worn and familiar
As his mother's.
The silent suffering of her kind
And no sharp features to readily entice.
This as well you will hear from me.

Nineteen I was when I saw the film.
A theater set on the main street of a small town
Where flowers filled with fragrance
Bloomed in the verdant spring.
My girlfriend's father drove in heavy rain
To get us there, showing a special involvement
With the wheel. A man cool to the snares of love

And wary of the limiting forces the world
Could bring to bear. "I never situate myself
Behind the average mind," we heard him state,
As justification for the constant passing
That was a staple of his road-action ways.
I had motion-filled instincts of my own, the kind
That led from room to room and book to book,

Lacking all ability to stay upon the page's plane,
And would burst through rooftops and restraining sashes
To the open space, where only air could find me
And relate to me as friend with gentle breezes.
The other day I saw a man in the snare
of solitaire, cards upon the computer
Screen against a background of bright blue.

He lived down an unpaved road as quiet
As the dirt. In a room below, separate
And apart and yet forever there, sat his wife,
She too keeping company with an electronic friend.

Somewhere in the distance someone mocking
The quiet they had come to and all that had escaped
Their torn net of care. At some point she called

To him with questions asked before.
He met her with the silence of resentment.
He chose to speak from that.
She took a position on the bed.
She spread her patience out,
As the earth had mentored her to do.
Lying down she was, awaiting his descent.

December 2004

The Birds

Two birds alighted
On my windowsill.
Alert, intent,
They presented a menu
For their feast.
After nesting in my hair,
They would peck at
My eyes and go on
From there.

Our beaks are long,
Our breath is bad,
And generally we dine
During daylight hours,
They felt obliged to add.

August 2004

Higher Learning

A stay of execution.
He got Goethe right

And a few others:
The Edict of Nantes

His mother
The Weimar Republic

His mother
The Count of Monte Cristo

His mother
By the way, what did Sammy

Mean saying he was
Out the door

To get himself
Some *bacon*?

November 2004

Talk to Me

How did you know what to say?
You do this every time
We walk down Broadway.
Who made your timing so impeccable?
And where did you get that preppie outfit,
The charcoal gray slacks and the blue blazer?
And what happened to your shoes that you
Aren't wearing any? And say,
Who the hell are you, anyway?

November 2004

Street

If I believed in the truth of narrative
I would tell you about the woman
On the gurney—aged, ashen, and still—
How she intersected my path on the street

As the strong young men wheeled her
From view. I would tell you of the things
around her, the man on the corner
Wiping his bruised and bleeding face

With a soiled sponge, the rogue
Construction crew and the jerrybuilt
Structure of their making, as well as
The child who had enough trust

To sit beside me on a bench.
Mostly I would tell you of the word
Kindness and how it dances in my
Consciousness like tissue in a wind.

August 2004

She Says

She is just a woman is what she says.
Sometimes, working as she does, her song
Gets tangled in her dress. She is outside
The building now, enjoying a smoke
While holding a placard that rhymes art with heart.

It's she who kissed him with the word "great,"
Not on the street where now he stands
But before he could turn the corner.
A subway nearby, a park idling in the distance.
Those plastic bags everywhere, some of them moving.

He feels lifted on the delirium express
As others gather under him, holding
Their spears to the raised position.
A real beauty, he shouts down,
Wanting all the specks below to know.

November 2004

Saturday

Harlem called to us.
Buildings of brown sugar
Where we might live out our life,
Our small estate in order,
The end glimpsed
As a straightaway stretch
Like Broadway itself
In those parts.

Making up our bed
To avoid death.
Vacuuming to avoid death.
Thoughts such as these
Came to us, as did the pronouncement
Of a Southern drill sergeant who said,
Son, thinking hurt us my head.

Decades gone by and what have we done
But blow our nose into a few tissues?

We fled to a museum
But froze on the steps.
Suppose our stepdaughter happened to be there?
It was evening by now.
How would it look
If, in the company of a girlfriend,
She were to see us alone
Among the relics of the past.

At some point, one has to answer the bell.
One has to push forward. One has to say,
Enough already, let her witness us
In our Saturday night aloneness.
Let the world see us in the assumed poverty
Of such a condition.
Let mimicry and ridicule and pity have their day.
Let dismissal reign.

We were met by a photograph of Vladimir Horowitz
Standing tall in his smallness.
And there was Igor Stravinsky as well,
Neither standing nor sitting but simply existing
Without the prohibitions of the world upon him,
His eyes, his whole face,

Leaking the creaturely aspect of his being.
Renata Adler was present as well,
With her svelte nationhood,
Speedboat and Yale Law School behind her.
Well, we are alone now and the city below has quieted
And we have no words for your kindness in listening.
We lie with our back turned to the muted TV
As we seek to wind down.
Oh life upon the water and the land.
Oh life we have never left but will someday.

November 2004

Run

The creatures made a night of it
With their run of the forest,
The brave donkey and the braver horse
And the chicken with its beak bright as fire.

In the lighted window of the forest shed,
Men counting money in a haze of cigar smoke
While the president out on the porch, declared:

“For a nation to have the force of a nation
The sound of a nation the reach of a nation
To slake its thirst in the soiled rivers of the nation
To understand that the plundering of a nation
Is the sole business of a nation...”

Confessing to something from his childhood
He could not get quite right as to the tone of the nation.

The creatures all ears.

January 2004

Report

No petals,
No lily pads on lake water
Or car lights overwhelming the dark
For sightings in the thicket.

Heard are the loud voices of men,
The ones who run through the streets
With possessions in hand.

Hunger on the move.
No one certain of its arrival time.

October 2004

Museum Photograph

A Whelan's drugstore window

Circa 1943

A forlorn street

Circa 1944

Kids diving off an East River pier circa—

Something you missed

Or had

But can't return to

You born looking back

Baby,

You!

November 2004

Penny

This you didn't know,
That the shiny new one
Stepped on and stepped over
Was of copper-plated zinc,
Or that, to keep down costs,
It now weighed 2.5 grams,
20 percent less than the old one.

A moment of truth arrives.
Not the woman beyond your reach
By the stored wisdom in her brain
But whether you are one with that rushing crowd
Or can follow your heart
And reach down for that trod-on treasure,
Which you, with some hesitation, do.

On the Internet you learn the facts
About your find you aren't
Smart enough to know on your own
Before inquiring about Ward's Island,
Where your sister died,
But that is for another time,
When the boss is not at your door
And the world so insistently calling.

July 2004

On Broadway

Sometimes I will pause
There on the street
And the route established
Through years of repetition
Will strike me
And I will say
No
I must not do this anymore,
The darkness is too much,
And there resolve
To find light in new patterns
So I can breathe
And say in the wee hours,
When I am home,
Morning will come
And we'll see
How things look then.

October 2004

Off Seventy-third Street

Last night I sat among strangers eating
Pasta puttanesca, mercifully

Spared anchovies from the polluted
Sea. A color TV held sway over

The amber-lit bar, its cantilevered
Presence more than a match for the minds

Of feckless drunks. There, with a thought
To join them and so return to the destructive path,

I heard a voice announce a party
Somewhere close by on a date to be

Determined. Bright lights, dancing,
The sound of oneness. All would be invited.

October 2004

Notes of a Committee Member

To you who deploy your words
In a tight and calibrated fit
And summon facts from the air
And show yourselves with gelled hair
While riding the testosterone express to nowhere,

See her relying on her ballpoint pen
For relief from all she has seen and heard and felt
As the world turns in a whisper and unicorns
Run free in a universe of their own making.

December 2004

Then It Came to Me

Much is happening throughout the nation.
In Santa Monica a woman has lost her bag
And so must walk a dusty road.
The kids back home scraping the mayo jar
With a noisy spoon
And the husband unshaven.
All he's good for is beer
For breakfast and berating her.
What to do about this woman?
I am in Central Park watching some man
Fly a kite and young girls with chains
Around their necks running free.

November 2004

The Death of Narrative

It was all a lie anyway.
It collapsed as soon
As you started on the path.
This it, what is it, anyway?
You ask.
Is it what's her name throwing
Herself on the railroad tracks?
Is it the whereabouts of Jake Barnes's balls?
Is it figments of your imagination down the hall?
You just better get the hell out of the way
When it comes along.
Or better yet, just don't answer the door.

November 2004

Off Seventy-third Street

Last night I sat among strangers
Eating pasta puttanesca, mercifully
Spared anchovies from the polluted sea.
A TV, cantilevered and glowing,
Drew the stares of the lonely drunks
At the bar. With a thought to join them
And so resume a destructive past,
I heard a voice announce a party
Somewhere down the road at a date
Still to be determined. Bright lights, dancing,
The sound of oneness. All were invited.

October 2004

Night Walk

Security guards on every corner
As a safeguard against violence.
Doctors in blood-stained lab coats
Clutching sharpened knives,
Their time for smiling
Having passed.
Men in suits are out in force as well,
Their primary purpose
To prostitute the air.
Many in the restaurant
Cling to seitan stew
And burdock root.
Somewhere a train whistle
In a city without tracks.
Even the rats put down
their glasses and cup
Their ears to listen.

October 2003

Park

People get restless.
They have a right to be.
The trees are calling,
Fragile honey locusts and sturdy oaks
And the green grass that lingers in their senses.
There goes Beth speeding along
With Baby Alice half out of her stroller
And there is Fred with his wandering dog
And a woman without child eating
Ice cream off a stick
And skateboard Sammy looking to knock
An old man down.
You sit here because you just passed
The house where young love died.
You don't live there anymore
And she doesn't either.

May 2004

Street

If I believed in the truth of narrative
I would tell you about the woman
On the gurney—aged, ashen, still—
Intersecting my path on the street
As the strong young men
Wheeled her from view.

I would tell you of the man on the corner
Wiping his face with an unclean rag,
Of the rogue construction crew
And the jerrybuilt structure of their making
As well as the child who had enough trust
To sit beside me on a bench.

Mostly I would tell you
Of the word
Kindness, how it dances
In my consciousness
Like tissue in a wind.

August 2004

Nighttime in New York

Her blond hair cascading
Down her thin back,
She bit into her falafel
while the man looked on.

“I’m shrinking,” he screamed.
There is no one home.
A coyote has eaten my brain
And nothing works except for the faucets.
I am just like my father.
I stand on the corner
With nowhere to go.”

This is an old story,
One we can end right there.

August 2004

Move

He was down there in the park.
He had his plastic bags and his cart.
He wanted money
Should I care to give
To go somewhere
His thoughts were not,
To be in the happy place
Where he had started long ago.

A woman called me to her.
She had dinner in her bag
And severity in her face.
She wore the look of one
Who has been slapped
And spoke of where in India
She wished to be,
Finding no need to smile
So as to obscure the darkness of her mind.

This thing of caring,
This dictate from within that we should,
And with it the urgent need to leave the scene,
Like the sparrow above in sudden flight.

August 2004

Mothers

Go ahead.
Extol your mothers,
You and you and you.
I'm listening.
My big ears hear
Your goodness-soaked voices.

But now
You listen
To me,
Ninnies of the western world.
Life calls to life,
The dead consort with the dead,
And when a rage comes over you
To sweep old ladies out of the way,
Trouble yourself to ask why.

As for me, as for me,
Well, let's just leave it there.

November 2004

Manhattan in the Midst

People want to be famous.
They have a right to be
And should know of the woman
With the red light in her closet,

The cat upon her head,
The goose bumps on her flesh,
The tremors from the seen,
And unseen she has felt.

Let them know of her party habit.
Her nationwide search for men,
And of the blind child who called
Out on her evening of anticipated fun,

Saying no one was out there
At the present moment
Or for any foreseeable time to come.

September 2004

Letter to the Air

All day long the phone ringing.
Smooth-talking kleptos trying
To access the code to your wallet.

The only real crime to be poor and old,
With oblivion the punishment.

Downstairs, a man of doubtful intention
Is seen with hose in hand watering down
The sidewalks of Broadway. Has anyone
Studied the effect of a nozzle on the mind?

There was something else,
But for now I don't know
Where it has gone.

Oh yes, I'm mostly indoors these days.
It's the momentum my life has gathered

And my spathiphyllum has gone sadly dead.

The point is to say something, just something.
This silence will not do.

August 2004

Happy

I took a pill this morning.
Long life, mental alertness,
A sense of well-being.
Oh yes, and sexual vigor, too.
All these now mine.
Unleashed, unlimited.
No longer playing against the clock.
Young in America once more.

October 2004

Floating Off

He wants to get this right.
He was simply lying there,
The way he often did
Following a light lunch,
When he felt how it might be

To be released from the body
That housed him as from a shell
Containing all that he had
Known and loved.

This is serious, the man said,
More serious than I
Ever could have known.

All this not in the dark of night
But during daylight hours

Remembering the current
That dragged him as a child
Before his father's hands
Could lead him back to shore.

July 2004

Flight

At the moment of my departure
I imagine how it would be
If you were gone
And I were left in unyielding silence
To wander these city streets knowing
All remembrance of you was only there in me,

That the speech patterns of the bricks
And the souls with mask-like faces of those
Who passed held no memory of your love
Or the barefoot steps you took in spring
Or what the texture of your skin was like
On full-moon nights in that house you fled.

This is my moment of tenderness,
The thoughts my being can summon
Before the engines commence
To lift us through concealing clouds
To the heights we need to go.

September 2004

Feel

You have a coat.
You feel it doesn't
Suit you anymore.
You feel you need
Something more defining.

This word *feel*. It has begun
To get in the way.
You want to say something
Harder, stronger.

You want a rock, a boulder, right there
In the middle of your sentence,
Something you can point to and say,
Try moving that, mister.

November 2004

Dream

You were scared
There in the night,
All alone.
But be honest.
You were also thrilled
To see him in the light
The dream shed,
His whiskered face
Attaching to the body of a bird
And you in its talons.
Those words he spoke,
In that seductive voice,
How he wouldn't hurt you
For the world,
But then that other voice
Telling you not to believe
A goddamn thing he said.
The vibrations of the earth
So threateningly felt
In the phone you dared not touch
Now ringing by your bed.

November 2004

Cool

The girl at the back
Of the class
Smiling strangely
And heard to say,
“I want your clothes,
I want your body,
I want your life.
I want to patent
Every move you make.
I want the straw you sip from
And the air you breathe.”
All this before
Fleeing the room.

“This cool thing—
You’re taking it too far.
Try eating some beef.”
This said after the girl had fled
By a boy in a state,
He himself unable to leave,
Transfixed as he was
By Cool’s gentle movement
Of a strand of hair.

“You’re making a mockery
Of my life. Show some respect.
I’m from Brooklyn,”
He went on,
When he could.

November 2004

Conversation

You put some words
Around what I said.
I heard you do it.

You made my head
Into a sandwich
And now you're eating it.

November 2004

Convention New York City 2004

Have they gone yet?
Have they taken the lies they've been fitted with,
Their attacks and viperous points of view?
Have they taken their polls and their strategy sessions
And their angry, snarling voices?
Have they vacated their suites
And left the deflating balloons to slowly sink
To the festooned ballroom's floor?
Have they taken their tailored suits,
Their color-coordinated ties and shirts
And gray faces groomed for enhancement?
Have they abandoned the tall buildings
Above our needy streets
For the planes that will whisk them
To the faraway spaces where they yet manage to hide?

September 2004

Celeste, November 2, 2004

I don't feel quite the same about him today as yesterday,
Though I understand how you might come to certain
Conclusions based on his Old World origins and accent.
Pompous, you declared him, and I take some responsibility
For leading you down the judgment path.

The scaffolding around the building detracted from
His Fifth Avenue address and seemed an admission of decrepitude.
Really, the office was quite small. I sat facing his secretary,
Whose tone was hard the few times she spoke to me.
Mostly she was on the phone with some family member, talking
In an aggrieved tone that let us know the concerns of patients
Were secondary to her own. Some calculated expression
Of hostility, some wearing of the prickly suit of attitude.

A man with a Park Avenue face also waiting.
I looked at him though he never once looked back at me, as if
To do so was to violate some complex code meant to ensure
His natural superiority. You pay a price for wearing clunky footwear
And shirts from the back of the closet, but that's where I was yesterday.
Not that my heart wasn't singing. I even wrote a poem on my walk
To the doctor's office. By the way, he worked me over a little bit.
Insinuation in his voice when he suggested I wasn't the type who
Would be able to inject myself every day as a reason for deciding
To prescribe the nasal spray. "You have veto power, of course,"
he said, but only after trotting out the words *spinal stenosis* as the ultimate
Progression of this so far intractable condition.

It's OK, Celeste. I walked on my own power up to the Guggenheim,
Where I saw artifacts of the past, Aztec figures zany in their mockery of time,
And fell in love with a slender and dark-haired woman with a high refinement
Quotient, the pull of her almost sufficient to overcome the reticence entailed by my Retard's
shoes. What good end can come of this age-inappropriateness? I suppose
I should wonder, though I lost her in the crowd, so where's the harm?

Today, I cast my vote. On my way to the polling place I wept. Four years
I've waited for this, the chance to pull that lever and throw the bum out.
The sun is shining temporarily and someone just whispered, "People be free."

November 2004

Celeste in December

Some line from a song you struggled
To recall before singing every stanza.
I angered inwardly at your gift of memory.
The rumble of rancor in place of appreciation.

Something about seeking strangers and
The comfort of the familiar. Something like that.

Today (these references to time—when will
They cease?) I ate asbestos to protect me
From the fire within. All went well for a while.
Cool ocean breezes, sailors sucking on lemons,
The integrity of blue sky. Land proved more dangerous.
A tiger pouncing on a zebra right there on Broadway.
How shockingly bright and red blood can be.
One (there's a word) wants to throw up his hands
At such savagery but even love, some kinds,
Can have its death and take its place among the ruins.

Speaking of which, my old school lives as something else
Two blocks north. Can you imagine?
Miss Spence compelling us to grasp
The wine-red sea and to contemplate
Romeo taking some new infection
To the eye, after which Robert Louis
Stevenson had the nerve to proclaim
Books a mighty bloodless substitute for life.
Sooner or later we all live in the care of the curmudgeon.
Still, one (that word again) could wish for the motive
Behind all pronouncement. What would we find
But a madman intent on stopping the train in its tracks.

Sometimes I also wish I could just go out for pizza
With the boys. I wonder now and then where
It is they went. It seems so long ago since they
Could be heard outside my window
Bouncing their basketball and calling for me
To come out and play, then dismissing me
When they sensed I had gone elsewhere,
This before they had a chance to do the same.

November 2004

Cafeteria

Morning cheer has faded.
No more birdlike chirping
Of those together following
The apartness of sleep.
Afternoon sullenness has arrived.

A fog hangs in the cafeteria
Where Oswald serves up
His stinky food
With a face of integrity.
The money changers in thin suits

Eat with soiled fingers.
We are in and among the tall buildings.
We have heard their tired tale
Of how they tried to reach the heavens
But got stuck beneath the clouds

And are sad to report the passing of
The beloved mother-in-law of Dawn
Cessifrakas, over at table three.
Condolences may be left
on her cubicle wall or sent

By way of silence to the funeral home
Where the deceased purportedly lies.
She is also accepting faxes and e-mails
and will tolerate the tedious delivery
Of snail mail. But don't go alone

To pay your alleged respects.
Be advised that the men of violence
Are tearing up the streets
And snacking on the trees.

November 2004

My Older Brother

The room we shared looked out on Broadway.
When the hurricane struck, he rooted
For nature to display its force, to separate
The wildly swaying radio store sign
Below our window from its hinges.
How he exulted when he got his wish.
There the hunk of metal and glass lay,
Smashed on the sidewalk,
Its neon bulbs broken in bits.

He had other sides as well, as when
He would in a trancelike state pull
His left forearm tight against his nose.
I sensed to leave him to his spell
As you would a sleepwalker.
A check of sorts was going on.
Was his blood still good was what he needed to know.
My own, he claimed, was foul and thin,
Like dirty water ready for the drain.

And then that time he went into action,
Wheeling and driving the air from my stomach
With a surprise punch after I had placed
A gift for our mother under the Christmas tree.

“Sit down, you two, and have some normal food,”
I hear her saying,
Though whether it was that day or the next
It’s lost to me to remember.

November 2004

Blind Man

Something about the edge he liked,
His seeing-eye dog a pole
With a wheel attached.
When the wheel rolled off the subway
Platform, he knew to step back.

Later we tried to take all this in
With our sentences. After a while
We moved on, only to come back,
Back to the fact of the edge
He would come to, again and again.

October 2004

Birthday Thoughts of an Older, Much Older, Sister

I could get you a card. I probably will.
Sexless, one that won't remind me
Of the night your robe fell open
And I ran into the night electric.

Something a little goofy, with a touch
Of humor sufficient to make you laugh.
I will add my name and the date and the word *love*.
That should do it for another year.

Your birthday arrives like a weight I cannot ignore.
I hear you somewhere, large, iron rancor
In your voice. I see a raincoat, black.
I see you in it, indoors and out, in all seasons.

Everyone gone. Mother, and the meals she cooked
To calm your storm.
Father, and the firefights you scorched each other in.
A brother and other sisters dispersed or dead.

The birthplace you never left so you could
Realize your unwavering and mysterious claim.
Alone in the dark you sit, by the light of the TV.
No one approaching, except through the mail.

October 2004

A Mother Speaks

You come home this minute.
I want you to put down that gun
And have some hot chocolate.
When is the last time you had some
Really good hot chocolate, the kind that
Makes you weep with joy?
And then I want you to read the funny papers
And have yourself a good laugh.
And then you're going to ride your bicycle
Around and around the loop,
The bicycle with no fenders,
The one you fell in love with
Up in Massachusetts (no, no one has been
Able to determine exactly where).
Then I want you to turn your attention
To the workers who gathered to cover
The dirt with hot asphalt, this on a day
When the sun was shining and you were young,
And remind yourself it was only a progression
Of what had been going on before.
Then I want you to spend the day with a blade
Of grass and call it friend. Check in with me
If any of this is confusing. I'll be here waiting.
You can count on that.

November 2004

Airplane

I am above the teased clouds,
Far from the ordered ground.
Earlier I saw in my dream a man
Shirtless and proud, his chest pressed
Against the point of a knife, and woke
To the fears and recriminations
Of my own mind, as if I had been
A spectator to some mortal sport.
Let me note too the man without
Shoes and another mumbling to himself
At the train platform's edge and the time
I spent with my mother long gone.
The day that started dark now
Grown so ruthlessly bright.

May 2004

Hey!

I had this idea for a poem—
An older man's attraction to young women.
That's it.
That's the poem.
But I grew tired before I started.
Who wants to hear about *that*?

My head.
I've lived there for a long time.
Sometimes I wonder if I'll ever vacate the premises.
One shabby room after another,
Things falling off their shelves,
Sticky stuff on the floor.
What a mess.

Anyway, I'm here now,
Should you want to reach me.
Bigelow 7-9496.
Area code astronomical.

August 2006

Writers Group

I know you said something to the police.
I just don't know what it was.
Know—a word I have come to rely upon.

There are some steady resources in this life,
Like the sari-clad woman who stands over my table
As I munch on poori and gobble lamb vindaloo.

If you truly think my writing stinks, send me
To some deserted archipelago where silence is the norm.
Go ahead, break my heart in its hidden places.

I want to say something nice.
No, not that the drain is stopped up and the toilet is overflowing.
Nice, I said.

Picture a serf uttering the word
In a Cossack-marauded village.
Then you might grasp what I mean.

You. You are nice,
Greeting me on this dark street
With a soft hello.

November 2006

Word

What does it mean to write you feel unwell
Or frightened and on the verge of being dispossessed?
Is the page supposed to be listening?
Look, last night on TV the famous women said
Words have value and do not come cheap.
Shouldn't this have been obvious to you?
Is it any wonder you find yourself in debt
And that the collector in his long black coat
Now batters down your fragile door?

December 2004

Wondering

He saw and heard the freedom highway
Beckoning beyond all concern
For what you thought or felt or said:
Why didn't you call?
Has the phone become too heavy
For your delicate hand?
Is there is a continent currently unknown
On which you now live?

To which he replies:
Are you aware the Golden Gate Bridge
Has only a five-foot rail and that
The chief engineer was himself
Barely five feet tall or that the streets
Of that city on the bay
Are bathed in a brilliant light?
Would you have me say anything more?

December 2004

Where Once I Walked

You had your fixed take on my dream
So long ago and I will admit
To some amazement. Please understand.
I have been wandering this stressed planet
For quite some time and naturally have
My own thoughts as to what it signified
For a robed woman to come from the nearby
Woods and lead me by the hand away
From the young men I had been seated with
Outside the law school building. True, they weren't
Friends of mine and a sense of apartness
Persisted through all our time together
But the sun was out and there was the chance
A bond could grow. Voluptuous and warm
Though she was, this was the woods to which
She was returning, where people have been
Known to wander, never to be seen again.

September 2005

Woman Crying

A woman crying disappears behind a door.
The man who loves her—so he says—
Can only wait out this flow of tears.

A wave breaks.
A vase survives its fall.

How comforting to know
The shoes he learned to tie are now
No more than particulate matter.

I wonder what a boat would look like
On a lake drained of water.

I wonder what a frog would cost
If it knew it was the only one.

I wonder why the bells of St. Mary's lie
Bleeding in the backward sun and that man—
You know which one—
Pretends to eat food that is not there.

This and other things he says out loud
to the vanished air.

The woman will dry her eyes.
She will reappear.
Hands that bleed are hands that work.
A wedding gown is being readied even now.

Space will be found in some empty chambers
Of their hearts. No one will be required to move out.

And between two shelves of books
A stranger will be heard to say,
It is here that I can be myself.

April 2005

Whistle

Then there is the man with the loud whistle never
Quite caught in the act of making his unfriendly sound,
The woman talking on the phone, her mouth clogged
With food in the adjoining cubicle. Others with devices
Attached to their ears on the midnight bus coasting by.

Show some consideration for the needs of others.
They are human too. Is everything about the terror
In store should you be the one to make a sound,
And having started, be unable to stop? Maintain
Your own silence a while longer before you find
Yourself in trouble, the voice dares say to me.

February 2005

Where I Was

You say Wellesley, Mass., is an irrelevant locale,
But have you seen the big white houses amid the fallen leaves?
And what about those steeples with their sharp points for God?
Suppose he fell out of the sky and onto one?
How would you feel, a pointed object thrusting you through like that?
It happened to my friend Reinhart years ago.
His kid brother pushed him out the window accidentally
On purpose—remember when we said that all the time?—
And he wound up impaled on the fence below.
Oh God (that word again, I know), the pain this life can summon.
No, we don't have to dwell on that, or on Lionel trains from
Many years past or our friend Billy who bragged about having them
But never invited us over to see. There's a lot of fear when
You're young. It can be hard to open up. God knows (there I go yet again)
What they'll find. But about that one particular house—
For some reason I imagine it empty now, a cold wind blowing
And angels with yellowed wings lying by its battered door.

November 2006

Manhattan Saturday Night

There on the water a tour boat laps the island.
Maybe that is something you could do
With someone sometime, just the two of you.
A sweet thought. But then what?
The waxy river with no power to keep you,
Not on a Saturday night, the cars ripping past,
Outpacing life itself. Across the highway
The basketball court where you once had played.

Minutes later, top-level on Broadway,
A stranger in fiftyish freefall stares
Through the smoked glass at the laptop loners,
Looking for a woman, looking for something,
Having seen his mother making him a quilt to die in.
He has some idea that down on the subway tracks
Is where he will find it. Next door in the old movie
Theater the old movies are playing. Vittorio de Sica
Twirls his mustache while dead men sleep in their seats.

It is time for you to be gone.
You offer a silent prayer, asking
Only for a kinder clarity to come.

November 2005

Uptown

When he talks to the dead they listen while dozing,
Old men outside the open garage absorbing
Jagged riffs of jazz on a circumvented street.

People who walk that way are known to say
They have been there before.

The universe simply a rain shower in a wistful mind.

A man dead set on the trifecta:
Trouble with food, trouble with money,
And now trouble with women.
A hottie (his word) one-third his age
Running naked in his brain.

When he talks to the dead they listen while weeping.
The colored lights of Christmas play on their skulls
And unwrapped presents of yesteryear are laid out before them.

Someone has been given a life sentence
For smelling the vinyl on old records.

Another watches his father throw a phone book at a drunk.

Others hold calipers to their heads to prove their perfection.

Your medical records show... is now a complete sentence.

Elsewhere, an unnamed man sits in his cube
Praying for release from his Internet obsession,
But there he is with his face in the screen all over again.

Face. Stupid. Internet.

None of that important.
Seeing something for the thousandth time,
It occurs to him that he shouldn't take it for granted
A next time will come.

It is just a feeling,
Mind you,
But he's been having some of those.
Like the time he lay on his bed imagining a heart attack

And where that would take him,
The matter of finiteness raising itself.

Every dead man likes a good walk,
Likes to see where he once was but is no more,

He can't stay,
Not on this street,
Not on that street.
He sees an old man in a Columbia slicker.
Calls to him but the man doesn't hear.
The dead are like that,
Obstinate,
Uncooperative.
Just so dead dead.

Buys himself a tea
In a Starbucks
Where the young have gathered.
They are in their deadness too.
Laptop deadness.
Cell phone deadness.
Paraphernalia of the plenipotentiaries deadness.

DVDs dedicated to the god of deadness
Mocha cappuccinos made from the waters of Lethe deadness.

I am taking a leak, he says to no one,
And wonders what the body is
That he should describe it like a faucet.

Faucet deadness too.

Talking to the men who are dead
Is the best thing he has ever done.
This he concludes as night returns.
The TV on with the sound off and the lights off.
Down below the cool jazz playing out the garage door
Into the ears of the old men not too dead to listen.

November 2005

Tracks

So when I tell you that above me,
On the grade, the men were trekking
Single file along the train tracks
Of my childhood toward the dark
Mouth of the tunnel, solitary
And speechless, in the way
That men drawn to the railroads are,
And tell you further that my heart
Livened from its dullness at the sight
Of them, I am speaking a truth
Surpassed only by the appearance
Of the wild horse, mane and skin
And bone thinning into air as it
Frantically fled what its face
Alone could speak of.

September 2006

Toronto 2005

On Yonge Street, the seagulls
Minding their morning manners.
The signs were everywhere:
Homeless men showing their private parts
And activist store signs brazen in the sun.

And yes, of course, litter bearing tangible
testimony to yesterday's excess.

Saying, the past is gone. I cannot fish there anymore.

(But wait. I recall a cobblestone street somewhere
In Denmark,
Men dropping their lines in the dark
And sleeping with their catch of eels,
Never having heard the bright neon call of America.)

Here in Toronto I walk streets that are new to me,
Streets shouting through glass,
Streets lying down in their deadness,
Streets with the augmented pride of taller buildings.

Where is my connection to the land, Mother?

Where is my connection to the flesh, Father?

Where have you gone, mind that matters,

That all you see is open space?

The white line continuing to go where it goes,
Over the hill
Down the hill
Faster faster
To the thing that awaits you

Have you not learned one single thing,
If only to stop seeking end notes of profundity
When there are none?

Go on, foolish one, go on.
You with your meaningless words.

When people are desperate, they eat Danishes in outdoor pavilions.

It's not unusual for lovers to commit to each other
By consuming millennial hot dogs from opposite ends.

*Simply understand that it can never be put together your life has no beginning
No middle no end only the circles of witnessing confusion that will cease when
You stop trying to figure it out*

Then the lake crept forward, though it never asked for a room at the hotels
On Front Street. The residents have been assured that water will always know its place.

The men of God have their say, all of them wearing wigs and outfitted with some
Of that shiny skin that's been going around. One of them is out there in left field.
The other covers second base in the stadium they have rented for their purpose.
That word *flock* is again in the air, sounding suggestively profane.

Oh, what do we know? Pop music is not the precursor of tears, an important-looking concierge
assures us. It blasts the doors off their hinges and sends the toilet seats flying.
People running to the dance floor with trousers down and dresses unzipped.
A crazy man boogies wearing a mask of solemnity. Days before he saw the daughters
Of solitude on this same floor as they too saw him. The hatred and rejection were
Instantaneous offerings of these kindred souls. Now they are nowhere to be seen, and so Mr.
Holy Fool gyrates exorcising the ghosts of his dorky high school past. By dancing with no one he
dances with everyone as crazy words fly from his mouth. Shuggy *Thomas* yes yes shuggy
Thomas. Can you line a double, *Sammy*? Can you hit a home run, *Wally*? Can you smoke a triple
to deep center field, *Pete*?

He is crying, "I am the lake and the lake is me and lady, your eyes don't see what they cannot
touch, and you, Mr. Muldoon, with your weighted mustache and your Pandora's box of flesh
sprung open—oh never mind, just never mind." A woman of the face police orders him to smile
but this is no mortal wound she has inflicted. He is equipped with accents of his own largeness
sufficient to withstand her impromptu thrust (such scrutinizers of the face are everywhere. They
come and go from walls that harbor them.)

That night he lies down on a bench. No room seems fitting, given the freedom he has found. His
mind tries to return, noting that his father and mother went through life without a driver's license
and yet are somewhere nearby in a parked car. Incredibly, he forgets all this when he wakes. A
man who can find nothing better to do than stand in the middle of the road approaches. Could
this be his high school coach? He is wearing an integrity belt. Something is going on here.
Deeper in the park a ballgame is in progress.
The man leads him there. They sit in the sun listening to an old man abuse the ump.

It is ten minutes before he realizes he has been here before.

Tom

Where is it you went that you do not call?
You were ailing. You had a hole where your heart
Was supposed to be. The wind was blowing through
And you heard the voices of others, never your own.
You wanted to drink, you had said, this on top
Of a pancreatic prognosis and outpatient status
At the rehab down the way. You said the moon
Was too small and you wanted the railroad tracks
To once more glisten in the night and for words
To sing and for women's skirts to carry the promise
Of spring. You said you were in an apartment
Without a door where roaches fat as your fist
Scurried across the floor in coats of fast-food grease,
That you could find no poetry in the sound of concrete
Or sparks of warmth in the permanence of cinder block.

I have no one emotion to give your disappearance.
I'll just call it wonder. Just wonder. I'll just leave it there.

December 2004

Time Shot

Back then I too
Carried a camera.
There on the Fenway
With my bulky Rolleiflex,
Taking 2 ¼ shots of Sarah
On the retaining wall,
The athletic field just beyond.
I grew anxious,
Anticipating a flare-up.
What kind of art is this,
Training a lens
On me and clicking?
Any moment she might say.

The art of those who feel
The urgency of time
And the need to capture it,
I would reply,
As I do now.

September 12, 2005

Thursday Evening

Near a couple seated on a bench
A fat rat tottered
Signifying old love may have died.
Close by, a woman smoothly
Joined her friend
Who conspicuously kept her eyes
On her book.
Something stylized and meant for
For public attention
About this little scene, I thought,
Bringing observation,
If not judgment,
To the business of living.

If I had one last thought before
Exiting the borough, it was only
This: I am no longer young.
But since when is that
Some sort of news?

On dark Brooklyn streets,
The bushes murmured
Of bygone days even as my new love
Remained elusive. "Where?"
I asked, stopping strangers
On immaculate corners while
Maintaining a constant state
Of motion. "Five blocks more,"
One said. Seven, no six,
Still others replied.
I felt my own smooth flow,
As if I were a train on foot.
Not a flower or tree was of a mind
To reveal itself, the world
In brownstones hiding.
Where else can such stillness be,
I wondered out loud,
No one answering.

What dream can be worse
Than not arriving where love is?
I came to the resting place,
And my love was there,
But she had found another

Who spoke from a place
Commensurate with
Mammoth thighs.
My love was beaming,
Beaming, and even I fell
under her new love's thrall.

A direction home was given me.
I sat, I read, I stared with hat askew,
Allowing the motion of my thoughts
To take me where they would,
As the train weighed down the old
And passive bridge. A voice
Soft and gentle had its say.
You have had your day.
You have had it, this voice declared.
Now come with me without delay.

September 2005

Thought for Celeste

The language of defeat
Tends toward bluntness.
You're not good enough.

Forget about the study
Of Paleolithic art.
Go walk the dog.

As for death,
I don't think
So very much
About my mother.

And yet, on this
Snowy April day
(can you believe it)
Awareness came.

Right there, in front
Of the railroad terminal,
Surrounded by
A crew of teenagers,

Their heads crowded
With all the things
They think they know.

I am my mother,
I heard myself say.
Imagine that, Celeste.
Just imagine that.

April 2006

Trying to Understand

This was seventh grade, when steel
Had not yet found my bones and transition
Was a stage you entered simply to find another.
A tree could be seen outside the classroom
Window and the words *gentle breeze* began
To accumulate some necessary meaning
Now that *zephyr* had its introduction to the air.

His name was Krause and thick wire covered
His cruddy teeth. A boy disliked by himself
And those who were asked to endure his company.
Snot streaming from the wide nostrils
Of his broad, flat nose, he provoked
My wrath that one so ugly should incriminate
With his freedom walk upon the earth.

Intimate in this room that had the decency
Of its natural light, I gave him the fist
That he deserved. I popped him in his ear
While sparing his expensive mouth.
Chestnuts had not yet begun to roast.
The turkey dressing had not yet been made.
We were early in the year of new adjustment.

A boy appeared. He had been there all along
With model ships to offer for display.
He called an entire brownstone home
And sheltered pilgrim ancestors in leaf-green
spaces, nature sounds arriving with him
On the peaceful air. No further proof was needed
To show who had made America so very great.

“We don’t do that here. We don’t do that here.”
He spoke these words into my face and at an angle
Looking down so penetration could have its way.
I heard him in the receiving space and surrendered
To his dominance, leaning my head upon his chest
And warning him of Hessians coming into view
In the crowded silence where now we stood.

December 2004

The Inquiry

There at island's end I saw ships with fragile rigging
And an ocean pulled taut over a forgotten realm. Fog loomed
Like a gray and billowing sheet beyond the corroded tin
Awnings and everywhere the swagger of commerce—
Towers wrapped in their sinister shaded glass dominating
The decorous small buildings charged with the weight
Of the past. To a stranger I heard myself say that New York
Is a city of villages as a woman fatted with food and her own
Merriment announced from a stage that she could save us.
I had been here before, of course. There was the man who said
Some years before he could make my life come out right who
Now walks trouser-less with his seeing-eye dog in local parks.

There is that opening scene in *Saturday Night Fever*, Tony Manero
Strutting with paint bucket in hand, and so we learn immediately
The gap between his dream and his reality. I thought of him as those
Around me discussed ways to improve what was clearly dying.
Buzz words were written hastily on chalkboard and people's pledges
To be good on scraps that littered the floor. A man in a lumber
Jacket ate corn on the cob and called us back to days of yore
As a chorus of the plump sang "Kumbaya." It serves no purpose
To pretend. If there is sorrow, There is sorrow. This longing
For the unknown, this regret, it is a river too and known to swell.

The host remarked on my hair. Her own was chemically white.
She frightened me, frankly, intuiting my meaning before my words
Were even struck. I too was granted the opportunity for the faux pas,
A woman moving away when she sensed my interest.
I too bit into the hors d'oeuvres, while awaiting the main meal.

September 2006

Tea Break

Only occasionally now do you find a woman looking at you
With a longing in her eyes that makes her lower them,
And when you finally notice you think you should go to her
And make things right in the sorrowed places of her life
That sees her at the top of her career but in a single space
And you say to yourself that you would but the time and place
Are not here and have not been for the years that you have
Walked alone in airports and on city streets if not in your dreams
And you say to yourself further that the look she gave will be
The treasure that you can hold to your heart because something
Is holding you from giving anything back, some anger, some
disappointment, some feeling you cannot touch but can yet sense
From the inward smile that came when you saw her eyes on you
In the way that they were. Because you don't mean to be mean,
You don't mean to be withholding, but you were born into something
That has not worked out so now you must walk away until tomorrow
Comes and only then will you be able to see what you can maybe do.

August 2006

Subway Thought

Then there is Rumpelstiltskin.
Or is the spelling not quite right?

Not much of a reader as a child
Nor very much read to.

A little in the dark here, and yet
The answer will come as so many do.

Answers—I've heard a thing or two
About them.

Let's just take a walk, me and my shadow,
And leave this funny business right where it is.

June 2005

St. Valentine's Day

Stop! Stop!
I heard
You call out.

The word *thief*
Not included
In your cry.

Rampaging cars
The only proof
Of my vile heart.

February 2005

Stairs

Old and dirty and worn down stairs
That lead from a noisy street and a woman
Expert on the hostility of chimps

The weight and heft of a Krugerrand
And the tan of a certain someone
With a distinct swagger over yonder

At the diplomats' party in the loud hotel.
We watch her hug books to her breasts
As her ultimate treasure and discern

Her tendency toward the stand-alone place
As she mounts one stair after another,
No one trailing lest she fall.

August 2005

What?

Where is your permission to speak?
Did it come to you in the night?
Has someone told you your words
Have meaning?
Should we laugh at such a possibility?

What's that you say? You are retreating
Into old movies and the discredited
Philosophy of the long since dead?
Can we but rejoice
That silence has descended,
Your noise license permanently revoked?

Academies and their warm halls
Are meant for those who fit within their walls.
Live in the cold and choppy water.
Feel its chill down into your bones.
Rest assured you're drifting
Where soon you won't be seen.

January 2005

Speak Again

What if there were no way to express myself,
If limitations of mind and energy compelled me
To walk the streets with words that would not look
Right on the page? Suppose sorrow rendered me
Mute over my vanished youth in another's face?

Some things I saw on this bright spring day were
A woman buying a rug for a house she no longer owned
And a car for children who were not there,
A man with skinny legs carrying fear in a small bag
And some indigent folks eating mashed potatoes on a toasted bun.
Even the flag of America showed signs of life,
Feeling frisky enough to leave a stamp and flutter in the air.
A car tire smoldered in a slow and stinky surrender to ruin
While the cheeks of the innocent were also set on fire.
Old women ice-skated on lakes of glass
And the moon held hegemony by only midday.
Creatures large and small vowed to wash the windows
Of their own lives so they could see
While the spiritually desperate wept with happiness
That the place of aloneness had been granted them.

There on a synagogue street the color red
Was put under investigation, red breeding red
Until it could be seen no more.

Then someone spoke:
"Finally he went home, and with an *orange*."
So his narrative began. People pretended
To be spellbound. Hear him now:

"I saw men drowning and spoke to them not.
I heard a child cry but listened with the wrong ear.
I plucked a grape and caused a riot of misfortune.
I saw hands of stone and blessed them as holy.
I saw pig fat in a puddle and called it paradise.
I experienced heat and put on my coat.
I answered the doorbell in a house that no longer stood.
I studied shorelines from the bottom of the ocean.
I made extravagant plans on the shells of walnuts.
On hearing the word *contraction* I ran for the hills.
When you said you loved me I found myself in Greece.
When I said I love you I was thrown into
The echo chamber of a bloodied vault and witnessed

A hammer attack on an unsuspecting midget.”

I have no one to fault for any of this.
The light clears when it can. Meanwhile
Let us sit, and await further instruction.
With renewed trust in our faithful guide.

April 2005

Somewhere

It is night, Alti, and the sorrow bombs are dropping
With soft sulfurous thuds on the ocean floor.
The thing is that the material I have gathered
Stretches only so far, a flimsy tarp to cover love's droppings.
What is it my heart hopes to express that I stare at the numbers
So square and large and phosphorescently green
On a newly purchased clock in the dark of a bedroom
You in your absence still possess? Jesus, Alti,
Everywhere people are rubbing noses as if in
The Nanook north instead of the swelter of summer.

Alti, I am so high off the ground I can see neither you nor the stars
Beyond which I have fled. I am a spooked moose, a wounded gelding,
A firefly in flight. Something has happened and it is only midweek.

Oh, Alti, even in daylight the heat of a perverse winter persists.
Words run helter-skelter down the highways of the world
Looking only for a can of Coke, so on fire are they.
What kind of words are these that cannot even save themselves?

And what is this mind that works for dominion
Only to flatten itself in obsequiousness?

Here. I have come back. I'm on the sidewalk.
Someone is speaking.
Another creature of inveterate aloneness.
Her words enter my chest
While mine go in at her feet.
The store signs along Broadway are
Bent in laughter at this ludicrous rite we perform
Even as buses roar past in their riot gear.

It's time to settle down and do something.
Let me start with a walk around the block.
Let me start somewhere.

August 2006

Someone Is Here

You sitting there in the window,
Your laptop at your fingertips,
Did you think the war would not find you,
That the declension of nouns would not
Suffer a battering and blood
Would not spurt from the throat of
The drugged rapper at midnight or
The drunk and delirious poet
In the subway tunnel at noon?

You have had your quiet time,
Your dolls of adulthood,
The pink room you thought
Would extend into eternity.

Come out now, we are waiting.
The floodwaters have risen.
The banks have been emptied.
We stand here knives in hand
Singing the new song that we can
In a key that makes for frightful listening.

November 2005

Sister

Your car
Your country home
Your academic swagger.

This doesn't have to be a novel.
I believe I can confine it to the page.

Bad blood.
Bell sounding
For sibling rivalry
Round one hundred fifty-seven.

You attack.
Say whatever.
Verbal violence your domain.
This time it doesn't end there.
I've been practicing, you see.

What, are you off your meds?
Out of your tree?
Flipped your wig?

Have I done it?
Have I staggered the beast?
Made you cry?

Been the brother I always wanted to be?

December 2005

Stop

Flowers strewn by the side of the road.
Their names I do not know,
Nor this place where Big Daddy
Has brought us,
The heavy equipment in tow,
So the work he calls urgent can begin.

February 2005

September 2, 2005

The sun competes with
A black cloud I cannot ignore.
A man reluctantly photographs my face,
Saying I am a distraction he cannot afford.
Though I fall on the floor
On seeing my own image,
He makes no effort to revive me.

Through the park I go, preceded by dust storms
Caused by fleeing feet. In the distance
A woman with no legs wears a white visor
And sings some old Credence Clearwater thing
While on the bridle path a rider-less
Horse now breathes more easily.

At the consulate, where I ask to leave the country,
The clerk behind bullet-proof glass eats
A meatless sandwich but does not speak.
Around me a young man committed to his own loneliness
And an elderly gent lifting barbells with withered arms.

The sound of plugs being pulled is everywhere.
The sound too, from somewhere,
Of water gurgling down a distant drain.

September 2005

September 3, 2005

When I call you to say
That last week
In the park
Amid synthetic leaves
I grew depressed,
I hear your fear,
The perceived threat
To your freedom,
And move quickly
To reassure you.
Love does that,
Relinquishes all claims to guilt.

Thereafter I go underground. A train is waiting.
Loud talk fills the car. People fearing they are invisible.
I wear my gold watch with the pleasure
We take in something new.
So far as I know it is keeping good time.

Then I ascend to street level. Tell me
You didn't think I would stay
Down there forever.

I pass a school from my long ago,
Feeling its effort to have meaning for me now.

In a room infused with unseen traditions
The topic is marriage and how,
In finding the other, they have found themselves.

On leaving it strikes me:
This month I turn fifty-eight.
Now do I see, as if for the first time,
The coming death obsession seeks to obscure.

Down by the arch someone singing a folk song
From another generation. Not a good thing, somehow.
Dirty hair. Dirty jeans.
The smell of the street too much upon him.

The area has its concrete spaces.
I lived here once.
I believe it was with you.

A man asks a woman with the youth and
Features to make him dizzy what it will
Take for her to come home with him
And holds up a bag of grapes,
Promising the greater share to her.

My watch has told me it is the hour for bed,
Where I will dream of some faraway place
And see dimensions unavailable to my
Conscious eye. Things will be given me
I did not expect and mercy and justice
Need not apply. Seeds of doubt will be
Seeds of growth and both will be rendered
Meaningless by the dream's own logic.

All this will be mine by turning off
The TV and laying down my head.

September 2005

Saturday Night, St. Mark's Place

I'm trying to grasp what you meant about
Angelique Jolie having the face of a fish
As seen through a magnifying glass.
All that gunfire exploding in the dark
Left little room for conversation,
And yet if weapons are America's national pastime
And we hold ourselves distant from the damage
A bullet can do, still there is the daily occurrence
Of children and lampposts
Discovering God together.

Speaking of lampposts, I could bond
With them back when I drank, but then,
Everyone in life has a special talent or two.

That bookstore we wound up in.
Was it a form of prayer
Or a sublimation of desperate urges?
Words of the dead seen but not heard,
Laid out on the graveyard page
As you licked your cupcake clean of
Its icing in unwarranted anticipation of more.

June 2005

Safe Landing

You ask me why I'm going.
Always with the questions.
They're people. That's why.
My nephew. My niece.
Flesh from my brother's blood,
The one who's not here anymore.
Yes, Florida, plainspoken prophets
Flipping their gilt-edged Bibles open and closed,
But that's all right.
I've read the book of Genesis.
I know where things start.
Maybe I'll stand in the middle
Of the room with no clothes on
Or be caught eating peanut butter out of a jar.
All my activity these days
Is about leaving something behind.
I imagine there will be long walks.
I was young once,
Can remember weighing eighty pounds
And reading Eugene O'Neill on a windy beach.
Does anyone have an interest in that fellow anymore?
You see? I can get with the questions, too.

November 2005

Run

You want to shake them,
So young, so dumb,
Running by themselves
To the ends of the earth,

Oblivious in the darkness
Of their rooms
Of the sun's absence,
The cost of deafness

To the would-be lovers' calls,
Of blindness to the longing
In their own hungry eyes.
Oh life lived alone,

Was it worth it to go on this way?
Tell me now,
From wherever you are.
Tell me, just tell me.

March 2006

Railroad Story America

Those words *take a walk* appear again,
Their frequency causing him to wince
Down by the railroad tracks,
Where he drinks from a pint of gin,

Wishing he had been admonished
With play dirt rather than the real thing.
Still, he finds no fault as he tries to assess
How failure can inhabit so many rooms

And decrees a failure diaspora,
Dispatching memories to foreign lands.
His question only this: Is it too late
For your love? as the stars begin to fall.

November 2005

Park Sound

Reading Roethke in the sun
While hearing the woman
On the next bench
Her voice a drill
Boring for something—
A core—she knew
Before this torrent of words.

September 2005

Out

I had no money and no one to be with
And so I walked, fleeing the ordering
Priority of snow for the magic lantern
Glowing red in the glen and the long
Forlorn whistle heralding the fast-moving train.

Beyond I saw tall buildings crying
That dullness had defeated their majesty
And the anonymous faces of men
With no memory of their dreams

And in the park (oh yes, the park)
Horses skating freely on the frozen pond.

April 2006

Out Walking

His smile could have signified anything:
A firecracker exploding in his mind,
A murderer's glance,

His grandmother's lilies,
A vision of you roasting on a spit.
That was real progress you showed,

Choosing to perceive something other
Than a signal of dubious, even malign intent.
Besides which, you got to draw your water from the well.

May 2005

Office

Behind the closed door the fat woman is laughing.
Enormous in volume it is,
Far more than the stars can adjust to.
Pouring out of her office like a rowdy river,
Sweeping chairs and files and desks
And the stinky lunch of my loathsome colleague
Out the window and into the congested streets.

I am flying now in a downward spiral,
The urgency of the situation requiring me
To place on hold listening devices and
Other nefarious instruments for entrapment
That tally a syllable count of every swear word
You ever thought, with bonus points for *fuck*.

Some song of yearning I recall had been playing,
Some need to come out of hiding
And join those strutting others
On the promenade of brandished talent
Or even some pathway in the park where
Desire could meet its mate.

I will leave alone the question as to what led me
To hide here and elsewhere in the first place.

Dizzy now with fear, I have this to say:
A blank page can be a friend.
You could fill it up.
Something might happen.
A connection. A home run.

Oh, yes,
To have said I'm here, if not forever.

Will you at least try to know what I mean?

June 2005

Office Life

The desire to kill is not obligatory.
A hatchet in the head is
Not every man's command.
I saw you with your favored
Look and said hello.

No small talk, nothing about
Your can of ginger ale
At 10 in the morning
Or your preposterous white shoes
Or your ever growing head.

I just waited for the elevator
To take me to another level,
And, to tell the truth, it did.

December 2004

Office Day

I am tired now. I have been here all day.
Outside my window the patina
coating the parapet of Lord & Taylor.
The store is going down, like a colossal ship
sinking in the roiled seas of commerce.
Oh the structure will stand, but some new spirit
Will soon arrive to infest it.

That is my concern, to snatch these fireflies
That visit my daylight hours. Phosphorescent
Flashes of life prompt me to write you now,
Whoever you are, to let you know
I am a living breathing thing and was able
To pick up my meds at a nearby Duane Reade
After sitting briefly in the hurting sun in Bryant Park.
There I had angry thoughts about my emasculating
Boss and further thoughts about the nature of judgment
And how it can rule me still.

I am to meet a new friend tonight.
It is possible he wants me to save him.
But from what? The love that he is blocked
From offering? At some point I will eat,
But I do not concern myself with when.
Thereafter my plan is to sit in the dark
And watch an old movie.
Anatomy of a Murder is my current choice.

July 2006

Hello, You

And then you realize that the woman with the bald spot
And the warm smile who just passed you in the hallway
Might in fact be a murderer. This fear grips you
She will return through the glass door now that
This awareness has come to you.

Because when you come to an understanding,
When you come to that place of full recognition,
Then is the danger upon you.
Nevertheless you go on your way and do
The things you have to do.

Something is happening here. Some pressure
From below or above is squeezing you,
Causing you to talk to yourself out loud.
Something is about to arrive that will
Shock you and not shock you, as it will

Only return you to a place you have been before
And maybe never even left. And does it matter?
The repetition of hot baths turning cold and all the rest
Is finite. It's all right, you say, if the time for specifics
Is not at hand. Meanwhile you neither weep nor laugh,

But simply stare at the light of the sun on the building
Across the way. Those windows are dirty, you are heard to say.
Someone will have to come and clean them soon. Why not today?

February 2007

Note on the Day

I needn't wonder at your power—
A word that stands quite well
Without adornment.
I made a mistake and later called
When I saw the nature of my offense.
It was hard to be dismissed like that
And forced to contemplate
Alternatives in my whirring mind.

The stuff that comes from an opened mouth.
To an ex-wife I confided my plan for retirement:
A midday leap off the Brooklyn Bridge.

Har de har har!

Happily, something came along.
A preening duck. Imagine that.
Right there on Broadway,
With those big feet and a big beak.

Headed right for the comedy club.
The star attraction quacking all the night long.

Oh, the miracle of distraction.

November 2005

Naples

You've said so many things in the course of your life
In trying to leave a record of where you have been.
But sitting on a hilltop with a man reluctant to be your friend
You count as a high point even though he has long since given up

Piloting ships in troubled waters. He doesn't fish in them
Either, he went on, before you took a break to find a restroom.
None of the gangsters down the hill assaulted you,
Nor did their progeny outside the opera house where street cleaners

Gathered their wits for the night ahead. It was twilight by now.
The boats were coming in and the smell of burning meat
Was everywhere. Above us women in evening gowns and men
Coming toward them in the luster of their suits.

January 2007

Mountain Top

He was heard on the taped message to say
The gun was his to keep, there on the ridge
Of the mountain where he had come to find
The one who had done him wrong.
As the clouds gave way, the Beelzebub
Leopard was seen running past.
He held his fire for the pagan god
Behind the silent tumult,
Seeking the chance to lodge a bullet
In the heart of one who offered
Such distressing choices so he might
Bring him hard to ground.

August 2006

Morningside Heights

The faded verse of scripture
On the building wall
A stick in the intellectual eye
Of the Columbia community
And heathen New York,
The gothic letters in pastel colors
Delivering the message that the wages of sin
Is death but the gift of God and all the rest...

Suicide plunges
Knife fights
Ditty bop crooners
Conks wrapped in colorful scarves
Watusi warriors of the night

Tenement Irish with bus driver fathers
Quart bottles of Rheingold clanking
In the brown bags they hold dear
To their chests as they head upstairs.

Terrance McDonnell, where are you?
I had my head blown off in the war.
And Jimmy Shannon, can we hear from you?
Thrown from a tall building for beating the dealer.

An old man saying this is where
And that is where and do you remember?
Living in detachment as he
Ghost-walks these changed streets.

December 2004

Morning and Night

This morning I heard a woman
Ask a question and gave my reply
From afar. Then I heard a man inquire
How her play was faring (yes, he used that word).
Later I heard a creature snarl his way
Up a subway staircase deaf to shouts for civility
And walked along the path the rain permitted,
Not once maledicting it with oaths from my average mind.

Tonight a woman on the far side of eternity
Will read her poems with a laughing lisp.
A cuckoo clock she keeps beside her bed
And a net above her head to collect
All utterances from the heavens sent.
A voice from my past, surely my mother,
Has ordered my appearance,
Saying it is the dharmic thing to do.

What am I to say in the face of such influences?
What? I merely ask.

December 2004

Memorial Service

You say you've been running around in the rain.
Me too. Even with the defense of an umbrella
It was almost too much. And then there are those
Eye bandits, like football players with a nose for the ball.
(Large men in the TV booth have been heard to speak such phrases.)
They see your hurt just when you hope they don't.
Bus drivers are the worst. They do it to me all the time. Take my advice.
Walking is definitely your best bet. Don't say I didn't warn you.

It's true. I was not myself at your father's service.
Sat there looking sort of nuts in my red polyester tie and vintage
Earth shoes—do you remember those weird things?—
Advertising my aloneness by not getting out of my chair.
You weren't much better, dancing a jig after shouting
That your papa was done and dead. Other remarkable tributes followed.

Who speaks this way except on a moment's notice?
The same spontaneity may apply to a visit to the old cinema
On East Fifty-eighth Street. You know the one I mean, across
From the Plaza Hotel. I could use the restorative of the dark
For a while. I think I'll go there and eat some peanuts.
Leave the shells scattered on the floor, like the monkey that I am.

September 2007

Meditation

Down down you go
Soon oblivious of the timer ticking.

An image of your brother appears.
The Pillsbury Doughboy,
The prodigal returning home to die,
And you neither his keeper nor his friend.

Now comes your sister, OD'd
On the floor of the SRO,
And the other one bloated and bobbing
In the currents of the East River.

You go to them,
You report on them,
You say, Sweethearts,
What does it mean that I'm still here?

July 2005

On Broadway

People are in love.
I see it. Don't you?
The girl in the outdoor café tilting her head
For a better angle into her lover's heart
And those women with their hands
So lightly resting on the strong arms of their men
As they promenade down Broadway.

Yes, the lovers are out in the warm city air.
There is perishing and birthing all around.
And I am here. I am among you.
At home. At last.
You ask about my beloved.
I am my beloved.
I am well pleased.

May 2007

Man Talking

Repeat after me: I am not guilty.
Why must we have this conversation
Each time we meet?

Ten city blocks in your oppressive
Company is testing my limits
But never mind all that for now.

Go have yourself a slice of pizza.
Indulge in an elevator conversation.
Watch TV with the blind and the deaf.

Get used to walls that don't know your name.
There's a street for you to go down.
Dark, where no one can find you.

October 2005

Man and Woman

A wave broke.

A vase fell.

A crying woman disappears behind a door.

The man outside can only wait.

The shoes he learned to tie no more

Than particulate matter.

He wonders what a boat would look like

On a lake fully drained,

What a frog would cost if it were

The only one,

Why the bells of St. Mary's lie cracked

In the sun and the baldheaded child eats

Food that is not there.

This and other things he says out loud

To the still air.

The woman will dry her eyes.

She will reappear.

Hands that bleed are hands that work.

A wedding gown is being readied even now

By señoritas with pincushion lips

No longer begging for a kiss.

Space will be found in some chamber

Of their lovers' hearts.

No eviction notices will be served,

And between two shelves of books

A stranger will be heard to say,

It is here that I can be myself.

April 2005

The Lower East Side

I took a walk in the sun.
The wind was blowing.

It was a dangerous day.
Thoughts of the past, of you.
Fragments embedded in a feeling.

I retreated to a store and ate a hot dog,
Then to another where I read painted words.

Later I talked to strangers who claimed
They were my friends.
A woman was among them,
Speaking from the ruins of her face.
She said she had gone to a party and never left,
Explaining everything without meaning to.

The sun stopped speaking for the day.
Shops were shuttered.
The wind was now a whip.
I fled underground into a manic train.
It shouted news from the bowels of the earth
But stayed on its level course.

A Hungarian woman waited for me
At the end of the line.
She ate three bowls of porridge
And buttered her own bread.
Her husband had a gun
And right then was wandering
Another continent seeking his revenge.
Some things never change, she said.

The city was in serious darkness now.
A light burned in the window
From which she waved.

I was in motion
As I always had been.
Away. Toward. It did not matter.
The time to go always arriving.

April 2005

Love Note

I was violent.
I stepped on roaches
And ate snakes,
engaging them in dialogue
before biting off their heads.

*You press me about Sunday night.
Why can't I see you?
Is there something going on?
Lady, we just met.
Your proprietary instincts appall me.*

I plundered the assets of the poor
And burned down whole libraries
With their occupants in them
For knowing more than me.

*You have no right to tell me I can't see
My ex-wife. No right whatsoever.
Where is it written that a man
Must have a heart full of hatred?*

The rain is falling.
It is filthy with the bad
Breath of millions.

Assess where you are at, old man.
Your stick is broken.
An empty room awaits.

May 2005

Losers

Losers in America
Weighed down by rejection slips
Give interviews on their knees,
The life of their past hanging
From hooks no one can see.

January 2005

Look

The barrier of glass
Will alter a face,

Cast it in a strange or
Even sinister light.

Even your lifelong friend
Poised to say goodbye.

May 2005

Listen

You never wake a sleeping street,
You foolish child.
You never come upon it in the night
With your noises of the day.

When light has gone
And flowers are in repose,
When grass is under lock and key
And the museum has barred its gilded door

To those who bleed from importuning,
You pause and listen to the pain apparent
In the air and accept the rhythm of its slow demise.

Regarding the word *friend* as an intrusion of the past,
You then lie down precisely where the earth permits.
Have I made myself clear, my only child?

January 2005

Light

“The light does more than linger.”
So a woman alone awoke and spoke.

“Every night I lose the light. Then daytime
Comes and calls itself the dawn of my desire.

Little children sign up and adults too
Have placed their orders. To the sun we say,

Commerce of the spirit is heard of here.
What is this wick that you have lit?

We stand here now at the water’s edge,
Hosing the sky free of unwelcome debris
While awaiting your further word,
If any there should further be.”

January 2005

Lay Down Your Head

Tell us in your own words about
The mother and her young son,
She bending down to graze his head
With tender lips and whisper in his ear.
Tell us about his eyes brimming with tears

And what that meant to you,
Standing in line at Hot & Crusty
For your single cinnamon bagel.

Can you say why that is the eternal moment,
Why the sight left you in tears as well
And unable to speak? Then tell us of the woman
Behind the counter whose patience you tried
As she waited to receive your order.

Have you no consideration for anyone, heedless child?

August 2005

Karen

When you left the room tonight it wasn't the first time
You had seen me coming. That would have been
In Starbucks more than five years ago.
At that time you involved me in a game of chicken
By staring into my eyes. What you said was that you
Couldn't hold the stare but wanted to practice
On me anyway. What you didn't know was that
Your eyes were a universe unto themselves
In which to get lost, and when I told you so
You felt betrayed and so the spell was broken.
Have you heard of the lake of shame,
The one such as I fell into, and do you know my hurt
That you never reached down your hand to help me out?

May 2005

Join Us

What's your hurry?
Where we're going is not
So far from where we are.
Come sit with us for a while.
We mean you no harm.
Tell us of your plans,
The things you have to do.
What's that you say?
You have a book to write
And immortality to claim?
A loved one is burning in a fire?
Your cat is crossing the line of no return?

Did we ever tell you about the time
We drank lemonade with a stranger?
That's it. Closer.
We'll tell you the whole deal,
Give you the full scoop.

September 2005

America

We were out there unfettered,
Not a cloud in our sky
Till I remembered I had come without money.
But luck was with me.
There was my bank, mine, in a strange city
Just across the street. I asked Gwen
Could I bring her anything after
I had refilled my wallet.
“All I want is a thong.
Is that too much to ask?”
I’ll tell you, those days
In the private spaces of cities,
The cornfields behind you
And the mountains ahead,
Were like no others

November 2016

The Politics of It

Failing that we can plan to have a democracy
While keeping Utopia as our destination.
By the way there is this town called Utica
In New York State. It features an old man
Crossing a street with the aid of a cane.
With his other hand he holds his bag
Of provisions for the day. The dust
Has a chance to live in Utica
And the sediment of old desire
Serves as bedrock. Come on by.
Stop for a drink and hear the parishioners
Sing with dry throats and worn hymnals open.
Witness the turning leaves and red brick walls
And feel your heart break forever
At silence as it was never meant to be.

November 2016

In Response Let Me Say

Sunrise didn't come often anymore,
And was followed when it did by a barrage
Of lies and distortion and the powerful
Wind of deceit tossing us about like
The rag dolls of long gone childhood,
As if our tormentors would be cast
Into eternal loneliness without
The darkness to ensure our full attention.

November 2016

Aftermath

Your breath your final friend
As you awaken to the debacle
That has befallen the country
Let the wrecking ball come in
Let destruction have its day
The oceans wash away entire states
The ruin of our cities be
Their vindictive victory
Let them hollow out the last
Remaining pockets of knowledge
Let them persecute the innocent
And laud the guilty
Let them fat man dance
On everything you hold dear
You have your breath
And the words it spawns
You have this

November 2016

Library Life

The impulse to approach her was there
And so you did,
Not in the moment of the prompt
But when it endured the shelves
Of books you browsed,
Heedless even of their titles,
This calling of one to another,
This desire to pause in your
Ceaseless silent passing in the day
And the night so you might recognize,
Acknowledge, so you might stop
And dare to smile and say hello.

November 2016

Over

Once again I was with you.
The world, if it was calling,
Had gone unheard in the depth of sleep.
But now I was awake
And I thought to close the distance between us
By coming to your side.
There you met me with a stiff arm braced
Across my chest and a renewed demand
That I bind myself to the cold beyond your door,
Opening even as you spoke.

November 2016

Is

“Is this pizza for me?”
asks Mr. Brown.
Always *is* with
Dying, dying Mr. Brown.
Time someone talked
To Mr. Brown,
Said
Uncouple, Mr. Brown.
Cut loose, Mr. Brown.
Sayonara to you
And your pizza,
Mr. Brown.

November 2004

Indian Restaurant

Suppose we were to talk about the dream.
I see you nodding your head. You say it has been
A hard week. A woman spent all your money
Eating Indian food with the straps of her red bra
Showing and now you're distressed. The question is
Whether your dream be contained within itself or fit into
A larger frame and speak for humanity. Model trains
Appear to feature prominently as well as environments
Related to your childhood, including an actual railroad
Where you played when you were young. What I hear you
Saying is that the woman posed a threat, a kind of adult responsibility
You consider entirely optional and from which you would retreat
Into the world of the New York Central, Erie Lackawanna,
And Union Pacific, though you soon realized that this treasure
Would inevitably draw the attention of others as well.
What's that you say? The significant scene in *Annie Hall*
Is the appearance of Paul Simon and his entourage in the bar
And how he pulls Annie Hall out of Woody Allen's orbit into
His own by exercising his greater power. And that now your world
Is made brighter by Margaret Rutherford as Miss Marple on
Late-night television? The comfort of childhood and old age,
You say, to deal with the fire from an angry woman's bra?
All right. I think we can work with this. Let's give it a try.

November 2004

Hunt

Now I am far away from you.
A force has taken me there.
I see you with your hair and
Laughing step
I see the makeup of your face
And the clothes you wear.
I note your features in my book.

Behind a glass you stand.
You strike it with your sound:
Lowdown beast
Callous crumb bun.

I tell you a dream:
A zebra so black and so white
Trotted where traffic once flowed,
Having its course to follow.
A tiger pounced upon the zebra's back
And feasted on its flesh.
Great gobs torn from bone.

Oh oh, this world of hunger.
Oh oh this cycle of birth and death.
Oh oh the animals spreading where
Men and women once roamed.

November 2005

Herculaneum

The time for dying came so suddenly.
A cross look, a sharp order, and then
Those separate lines that moved us farther apart.
Confessions of past sins were of course demanded,
Thin lines of blood appearing on faces and limbs.
Funny how we knew all along it would come to this,
That we had been here before,
In another time and another place
That were the same time and the same place.
As the dark clouds settled in,
We learned to love our master,
To do all that we could to be good for him,
Even the barking dog falling silent
In his simplifying midst.

September 2006

In the Heat of the Night

Suddenly I saw it for what it was,
Sparks in the sky
A chimney belching disappearing smoke.
The man wanted to win a basketball game.
He put his passion into it,
The veins in his neck visible
As he raged at the dispassionate referee.
It's not always that way when we're
So close to death,
Such heat-of-the-moment stuff.

Go Now

And those words that disappeared from the pages of the book
Like meat from a bone only you hadn't eaten them.
There was nothing to digest and so you went and found another,
A volume of poems on a thief's rack of stolen goods
And then forgot those as well. Why do things always come
To you while waiting for the elevator, you ask yourself.
Shouldn't these revelations happen after you have been lowered
Or risen to your intended destination? But now a new crisis is at hand.
Freddy's phone plays a prerecorded message that should, for the mercy
Of one and all, only say gone missing or fell through the cracks
And who cares anyway. He was involved in Spanish translation the last
Anyone heard and wearing some kind of cap, the way that downtrodden
Poets are supposed to do. For the love of God, where are my nail clippers?
Things are out of control, you are heard to say. And that graveyard
Of scuffed shoes under my bed. Really, I didn't know the extent to which
I would have to come clean. Here you begin to cry, entirely forgetting
That once upon a time you walked the streets of San Francisco and streaked Across
the Golden Gate Bridge with your bladder bursting, the orange
And vermilion not a fruit but a reminder of earth standing above its station.
I have to run now, you say.
Someone is coming. I'm told she is quite important.
And a voice says, well, go on then,
Only please stop for groceries on the way home,
As the pantry is clearly bare.

January 2007

Finish Line

There is a drift toward conspicuous peeve
That you may wish to rein in. I offer this to you
As a nocturnal thought, a kind of balance to
The excess of blandishment your poem
Initially elicited from me. I don't
Believe you ever met my sister, who
Is fond of saying it takes a small head
To sink into a marshmallow's softness.
No sexual innuendo here, so far as I can tell,
Though at one point—well, we needn't proceed.

This evening, on the subway heading home,
I suddenly felt desperate to meet someone.
Maybe I could go to one of those poetry readings
Down at St. Marks on the Bowery.
A woman would be there. We could enter the night together.
But the economy of my life drove me to buy acorn
Squash, Swiss chard, a bunch of broccoli.
On the street were kids hitting an aggressive stride
As a reminder that it was Halloween.
Funny how it is now. Corn candy and diabetic death.
An atmosphere of need and entitlement and noxious greed,
Of menace, some strand of rage, that no one else appears to see.

But what you're running from you're running toward,
I heard you once say. A mother and daughter in the
Elevator with me, the child wearing a witch's hat
And black cape to go with her painted face. That ride
A revelation, my pockets empty for the importuning girl.

How safe I felt double-locking the door for the night.
The cooking done, I worked out on my NordicTrack
And finished reading *Leaves of Grass*, then continued on with
The Adventures of Augie March. I still have a ways to go
But even ten pages a night should bring the end in sight.

October 2006

Personal History

Yes, I have a fever.
It requires me to speak,
To say where I have been
And where I am going,
To acknowledge debts
While canceling obligations,
To look out the window
And see only you
In the moon mist
And in earshot of stars
Accepting their nakedness.

Once, long ago,
A treaty was struck.
Men shed their clothes
And bathed in clean waters.
Women oiled their bodies
And sang and danced.
Friends discussed
The nature of nature
Around a big and warming fire.

Somewhere in the distance
The words *tarnished*
And *forbidden*
Struck their notes.
The reign of torture
Gathered in the gloaming.

A thin red line of blood appeared,
Separating one from another.

I'm going to the movies tonight.
Something good is playing.
So I hear.
December 2004

Feeding Time

I wouldn't have expected anything less, of course.

You are on high. The words that fall

From your position

Have a gravity all their own.

Unwavering

Faith

God in his goodness

Doors close

Open

Close only to

Open

Again

Things never fall apart except to

Coalesce.

I see them coming,

These words gaining strength

Mouth

Wide

A baby bird

Being fed its baby worm.

November 2005

After Reading Balakian

Father, it has taken
Fifty-eight years
For me to miss you,
To feel you as a weight
Within my bones.

Father, he was naming names.
He came fortified with facts—
Of towns and villages and streets
He can tell you things.
He knows the names of foods
And flowers too,
Where the hyacinth grows
And the jasmine cannot go.

Father, he knows the mineral content
Of the Armenian soul in the rubble
Of a leveled town and can
Meditate on the word *parched*
For hours and what it means
To make of a girl's hair a wick
By slicking it with kerosene.

He can speak with authority
Through his own father's bones.

No one should leave him
Bleeding into the earth
Now that he is wearing
A Yankee cap.

Father, I have no
Excavations to perform,
No secrets to unearth,
Just the recurring image of you
Passing through the lobby
In your wide-lapelled
Robert Hall suit

And of your thinning hair
Raked back along your scalp.
You are smiling.

Walking makes you happy.
God makes you happy.
Oral Roberts and his ilk
Make you happy.

The bright lights of midtown Manhattan
Draw you. Down to the Automat you go,
Where you can sit in anonymous peace
Among the crowds, undiscovered by a past
That escapes your awareness save in those moments
When you blurt at the dinner table
That we have lost everything, everything.

When I ask why it is you passed on to me a name
That weighs fifty pounds
You have no answer for my pain

You have only the fire of your own
Searing form of justice
That elevates your hand to weapon-grade.

Here is what I can see, Father. Here.

The tension of closeness is too much for you
The world you have blindly wrought
Is not the one you wanted.
You fight to be free in green pastures with Mother
And no infant cries all around you.

Father, I have been through the cycles
Of deceit and betrayal.
I disowned you at three,
Assigned you a coffin in which you slept
During daylight hours,
Confusing you with him who drinks
Blood in the night.

I said I was my mother's son
And called all those
Who came within your brittle province
Wanderers from the safety of their right minds.

Father, some years ago,
On the creaky floors of the old
B. Altman, I paid for a pair of pants
With a credit card.
The salesman, noting my name,
Gave me an appraising look.
"You're tall for an Armenian," he said,
Identifying himself as Turk.

Some insinuation, real or imagined,
In his voice—*we can cut people like
You down to size*—summoned ancient
Enmity, awakening that in me which
Has been sleeping and belongs with you.

This is all I have for now. I will keep
You posted as more information
Makes itself available.

September 2005

Father Thoughts

My father frightens me.
Those whacking hands.
That stony stare.
I found him on the street somewhere,
Derelict of passion,
As only men can be,
A homburg on his hollow head.

Entering the path
Of his parade,
I bowed and kissed
His wingtip shoes
And hooked him on flattery—
Lord and master, sire—
While waiting for the moment
To deny him my deference
And draw out his despair.

At that point he will
Put aside his papers
And approach the window
Of his tenth floor suite
And see the speck below.

July 2006

Fallen Man

A man face down with a fractured skull,
His dog licking at the pool of blood.
Some rascal reportedly ran off with his shoes.

The scene a newspaper stand
At Forty-first and Third.

A paramedic pumped by the crisis
Felt for his pulse.

Newspapers caught in the strong wind
Blew down the avenue.
Other debris joined the parade.

Some of this I saw
Before moving on.

April 2005

What He Did

Fairbridge had the advantage of a name
That meant something in both its parts
And the respectability of an apartment with a river view
And a father with the title of professor
At the university up the hill.

My brother, Luke, took a derisive tone in noting
His athlete's foot, but this was later,
When Fairbridge made inroads on my brother's girlfriend
By drawing on his father's genes to tutor her in math.

Luke and I had a father. We weren't required
To do without. He worked at Jack Dempsey's
Restaurant down on Forty-ninth and Seventh,
The proprietor's face was on the matchbooks he brought home
They were useful for burning old newspapers
In the garbage-strewn alleyways where we played.

We asked for a train set for Christmas
And bought it ourselves.
The Texas Special.
It ran on "027" track, something less
Than the "O" gauge of the luxury models.
The comparison brought suffering,
As my mother warned the world of things would do.

Entering Fairbridge's apartment I was stunned
By order beyond my reckoning:
The color-coordinated furnishings.
No linoleum on the living room floor,
No bed for a sofa with a soiled wall
Serving as a headrest.
No roaches streaming in all directions.

In his room a layout featuring mountain passes
And trestles spanning gorges.
Two trains he ran at once, a Santa Fe diesel
And a Seaboard Line workhorse.

As the second turned down the perimeter route
I threw a switch that drove it from the tracks.
Fairbridge saw as well, and in one decisive action
Deposited me beyond his door,
Lest my destructiveness further infect his home.
My brother followed soon thereafter, unescorted.
I saw his saddened eyes and he saw mine as we made
Our way back where we belonged.

Exhibition

The clothes were trying,
There in the shop windows,
But no one saw them,
Not even little Nellie
Naked with his drum on the strip
Where Cary Grant once strolled.
Rats were heading in from the cold,
Moving toward some unseen
Mass of mansions.
Something had changed in the culture
That Chinese art was in the ascendant
And a man in a fiery Mao jacket
Should glorify the luscious O
That his brush had stroked.
The British were involved.
They had sailed the seas,
You know, showing a need
To escape themselves
On distant shores.

And then there was
The Indian man
(from the subcontinent, if you please)
Reading *In Cold Blood*
on the Third Avenue bus

And the silver light trumping the fog
That you had sought to cast.

March 2006

Escape

You wonder now about that time you told,
If only in your mind,
The rioters and all those with a criminal intent
Simply to behave as you recall
The bridge you made into a finish line,
And the terror that would build
That you might not get there fast enough—
The car stalled, the mob gaining,
The immolation imminent of you from the earth.

Everywhere you try to show your goodness.
Some agony of emotion causing immobilization
On the way to work as you ponder yourself
In relation to others. Would things not go better
If you simply accepted the doorman
As he was and left your guilt behind?

Is there some truth that needs to be acknowledged here,
That you stand in fear of his anger at having less than you?
You know you must change. This you know.

In the meantime you offer a woman
Your seat on the subway and she rebuffs you harshly.
And though you are hurt, you take it as a sign
Of the needed correction to come.

Oh, life that screams for pleasure and brings pain
And places its baffled textures
In the warped hold of your seeking mind.

November 2005

Elevator Talk

I think we're safe in assuming
The woman meant no harm
Reading a thick book
In the elevator as it rose,
And can further assume the choice
Was driven by shyness
And a natural curiosity that caused her
To turn away from other things
Life has to offer:
The fowl at dawn,
The smell of fuel,
The sudden explosions of incandescent folly,
The saturation point that evil oversteps,
The seventh inning stretch of a loved one after dark,
The sadness of lawn furniture of the recently deceased,
The calendar on the wall of a room unvisited for years,
Your aging face at bedtime as seen in the bathroom mirror.

"I trust the mobility of my eyes upon the printed word,"
She said. "I see from black to white and white to black
And the movement of my mind is like the breaking of
A swollen sea upon the obdurate rock the drowning
Hope to reach. I am not lonely, I am found, like a feeble
Traveler at the edge of his demise whose thirst is slaked
By oceans of particles and mud from his own ruins. I am
Abetted by the switchblade knives in novels lousy with crime
And have acquired the patience of dusty shelves to which
My material has been remanded. I have no fear of contortions
Or gyrations or the reckless sounds of disapproval ricocheting
Off the unseen walls. Though I wasn't born into a life of splendor,
I have created my own out of the wealth of others,
And do not call it plunder when *reparation* is the word
You're looking for. Earlier today, you were heard telling me
Life is a wonder that a person can walk and read
At the very same time, but where have you been, you
With your demigods of babble on late night TV
And the envious glances you cast upon the young,
Chanting under your breath that you have seen the seeds

Of their destruction and memorizing the accomplishments
Of these stars you were never born to be or even chance to meet?

“At some point a person has to turn the music off
For it to begin. You must reach that point of nausea
With the unseen disturbances to the air and risk the dim
Perception of something bigger than you could previously
Contemplate seeking to assign you the codifying slot you
Yourself assented to. Isn't that what it means for granite
Structures to contain the art they're built to protect?
You must take the chance of acknowledging that the sum total
Of your life has been a performance for those who were never there,
The ghostly parent distracted from the very sight of you
By words like love responsibility and heartfelt anger.
All I mean to say is that if you trouble me I'll trouble you back
Not with retribution but with the expeditious delivery of the wind
That blows through alleyways where sodden boys sought
To torture me back in the childhood they could not leave.”

Let's do as the woman said.
Let's allow for the silence to be heard.

March 2005

Dylan

You were back with your antenna hair
Singing, snarling, reflecting.
You summoned all the old pain,
As if it had never left.
Made me feel sad and bad
At fifty-eight
As I had at twenty-one
Or all the ages before or after
That I heard your name or sound.
Like The New Yorker Theater,
Where my love and I saw
Don't Look Back
When it still had its time for existence.
“A genius, he's a genius,
And you're not. Can't you see?”
So she said,
Accusatorially.

You, causing a whole universe
To cry and agonize over
What we lack.
What kind of gift is that?

September 2005

On the Line

I don't mean to shock you but I feel I am dead among the living or living among the dead. I laugh at couples and what I dismiss as their preposterousness and in general see without verification that what I see is real. Last night, for example, the man in a designer shirt sitting among the young. He was lost to his desire to possess their youth. It is not to find fault but to assist that I would offer him the tools to deal with his sadness. All I know to do is to wake up early and write my quantum of words. Perhaps revise my will. Nobody will want anything but my money, a thought that disturbs me less than it possibly should. My goal is to transfer my life to paper, but then I consider the graveyard of books let alone unpublished manuscripts. Still, I have no choice. I am writing this on a train to Brooklyn. Eye contact has been made with a young tough born to lose who sees my pen and notebook as the fragile tools they are. I am distracted. I will get back to this another time, when my life is not on the line.

November 2006

Dinner Out

Suppose we were to turn it around?
Suppose we were to say it's a good thing
That you talk about yourself so much—

The time in Philadelphia that...
The time in Denver that...

And yes, the same for the things you do not say—
The idea for a first-person novel about your father
That comes to you on the subway ride to work

Or the love you feel for a stepdaughter
And the way her boyfriend looks at you
As you say your slow goodbye.

November 2006

Departure

I am free of you now, though I would have preferred
A gentler parting than what you permitted
With your insistence, frankly tiresome,
That we had a collaboration, meaning I couldn't leave
Unless you gave your express permission.

I told a friend about the time I brought up
Termination and you replied I could
Fly out the door and never come back.
When I repeated your words the following week
You denied they were your own.
“I never talk that way,” you said, leaving
No room for a sliver of doubt in your mind.

When I asked you what the goal of this therapy was,
You said that “goal” was too precise a word.
When I said I could never get any traction
Because you chose not to support such a discussion,
You said we needed to examine the need I felt
For traction in the first place.

Frankly I was scared of you, and that's on me
That I was such a cowering dunderhead for so long.
I had to write a letter of copious thanks before
I could see things as they really were—
You a big bird with me in your talons
Until a stick in your eye caused you to let go.

I'm going dancing tonight. Pledging a monthly check
To my struggling ex-wife. Buying an extra pair
Of socks and a couple of chili dogs. And, yes,
A new garbage can for my kitchen.

March 2006

Day

A man called to say he had helped someone.
And that his act of kindness had made him happy.
He then hung up without saying goodbye.
Before he did he made a date for us to meet.

Another pondered disappearance
And what that can mean in a young person's life.
"Once you learn to play, it becomes a habit,"
He said with complete assurance.

A third reported he was learning to say hello.
He described beads of sweat dotting his face.
Rocks and trees and babbling brooks he could do.
It was people who were problematic, he declared.

It is sundown in the city.
A man adorns himself in his newly bought shirt,
while his lifelong friend has grown weak fasting
In the air-conditioned desert he calls home.

I am on my way to nouvelle cuisine
And may stop off for a piece of fruit.
Cerise. Cherry red,
I learned today, in French.

July 2005

Country Kitchen

I would like to say something.
It is only this.

Blood red was the color
Of our kitchen floor,
Beyond which swung
The bird feeder
In the insistent breeze.

There, as my wife
Read my story,
The thought came
That nothing of the kind
Would save me,

That language would
Ultimately lie flat
As a corpse
On the pages.

And this came too,
That nothing apart from what I wrote could save me
And that the heavenly bodies could not save me.

These things I saw and grew tired
And turned in my longing to you.

And then I was on a train and weeping.
And then I was in a strange apartment where I woke not knowing
Until knowing came, and with it the pain, and I cried, "Why me?"
And the voice answered in the way that it would, "Why not you?"

And then I was on the street where dead men walked and a stranger
Spoke to me the words *reflexive* and *reflective* a propos my wife
As a gift of the marshaled morning energy flowing from him.

It was a different time then.

That is what I want to say.
A different time.

July 2006

Corner

I saw her ahead of me,
The way she always was
Ahead of me, and when
She turned the corner
I could only follow.

From high above
A man looked on.
I told him of my goodness
But he hissed and spat,
Threw bricks and bats.

At work I spoke to my boss
Of snakes and periwinkles
I had never seen,
The grip of fear
Men have on my
Imagination,
And locations where
Blood-rich circles
Can be found
Marking the place of demise
Of those who have transgressed.

I told her further
Of the ambience of doubt
In which I have lived
And the questioning spaces
In which I for now
must continue to dwell.

Many hours passed
In her company
But marriage was
Off the table.

My briefcase

She confiscated
For holding only
The weather report.

Doors were closing
On the dark streets,
The corners grew
Ever tighter,
Angles sharper.
People turning,
Disappearing.

Her.
We're talking about her.

June 2005

Confession

I told the truth last night to someone not my father
Though he resembles him. What I said laid me low,
Sent me far down beneath the trees and the earth itself
To a place I'd never been, though it was a truth I have been
Confessing my whole life, my abject stupidity
And lack of worth. He came back with a predictable
Response, the value of all humanity in the eyes of the Creator.

Oh yes, the Creator. I have heard of him,
Master of homogeny and all discrete parts,
Purveyor of truth as a scented essence borne on the wind,
Supporter of investment counseling as well as
Inveterate poverty, whom legions have tracked
Along six-lane highways with loaded guns and stalked
With an ice pick mentality in foreign fields.

A matter requiring the utmost consideration, this man
Also said to me. Let us head outside for a session
In the sun, where he is rumored to abide.

May 2005

City Life

El Stupido revving his Harley
In the ears of the jealous night
Or switchblade Sammy under
Sodium vapor whiteness
Dreaming of his initials carved
In his antagonist's chest.

Or your mother's mashed potatoes
Whipped in a kitchen sink
Black beneath eroded enamel
And once full of Hudson River eels.

When you pray to the noise god,
Do not expect to be paid in silence
But red-hot piss from a bile-filled bladder.

It is no crime to turn your life
Into a question
Or to be angry all the time.
You are free to ride the subway
Or take a leak in Central Park.
Oceans will not always find
You in your hiding place.

Imagine, if you will, the hot sands
Of Coney Island in a deceased time.
In the distance a speck
Becomes a man laboring
Under the weight
Of a black box
Strapped to his bare back.
Hang out with him
As he hands you a
Dixie cup cooled by dry ice.
Then imagine all the rotten meat
You've eaten at the hot dog
Stands of yore.

Sing this song of the city
In your heart and mind.
Sing it in your hermetic
Silence out of here.

February 2005

Campaign

I stood outside and shook your outstretched hands,
Positioning myself where you would have to find me—
hot dog stands, vending machines, bordellos,
Swinging doors of saloons, main entrances
To institutes for the study of the criminally insane.
And yes, you came—with missing limbs and crooked spines
And holes in your misshapen heads.
Sometimes I stood naked. Sometimes I appeared in outfits—
Indian chief, desert explorer, lunar astronaut, decorated war hero—
And struck poses—thief in the night, long distance runner.
I gave myself names—Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego—
And kept a button in reserve that read, “Just call me Willie.”
Sometimes I stood straight. Sometimes I appeared bent and hooked.
Sometimes my countenance was fierce, my skin on fire shouting
“I am the vengeance of the Lord.” At other times I beseeched you
For your undeserved mercy. But my hand always was extended
And I gave kisses on both cheeks and full on the lips.
Young or old, your beauty received the recognition it required
With billboard ads that read, “Tainted flesh is not a tainted soul.”
Though I had lost everything and because I had lost everything
I wept with joy while the pitiless stars at night showed off their dry eyes.
There had been a woman. There had been a child. There had been
A hill and a house and a car to get us there in all kinds of weather.
I gave you my personal history on the back of a postcard.
I have lived and I have died and now I live again is all it said.
I could have told you more, anecdotal evidence of a life poorly spent:
The man in raiment of white who told me I was in the bar not for women
But for bottles. The god in human form who came to save me.
These things I attest to in daylight or darkness with flowers
Hidden or exposed. This is the information you must go on.
Yes, please. Give me that hand. Give me those lips.

November 2005

Bus

Out there in the fenced field
The boy looked small.
Hardballs and softballs, he threw them both.

The city came in view,
Tall buildings rising in monumental conceit.
A promise broken not to talk that way.

“I’ll be your friend,” someone said.
I closed my eyes and prayed for the patience
Of grass to await some further change.

May 2004

Buddha

When I mention the Buddha
And his experience in the palace
How the flesh is seen when courtesans
Are come upon in the slumbering pose

When I say with conviction
That the perception of creaturely beings
Is one you cannot come back from...

Her red bra of fire
Her position statement
Hanging from a crumbling ceiling
In Brooklyn she sleeps
And schedules her dreams
And argues the arcane on piers
Shrouded in mist

He has showered and shaved.
He has listened to Carole King.
He has read two poems by Sharon Olds
And said the words *one funky brother*,
Living in their sound and all they don't convey
Of his longing for *tender embrace*.

The building made the choice to fly upward
And forsake the ground, he tells those rushing by.
Who is to blame that its drive for transcendence has
Been aborted and stands revealed as truncate folly?

He does no dance of delight
Around its finite parts.

Can I have my house lived in?
He says this on Sixth Avenue
In a gray January light.
He has prepared to cross this street before,
Wise to the rampaging trucks
And buses, those who rule the road

With their berserk power.

Can I see this woman?
Can I keep her with me given
All the images now coming?

I know about this wretched palace.
I have been in it before
With the dancing girls before they slept.

I will too talk all I please.

January 2005

Brother

In the dream I was back there on East Broadway
With the bok choy bandits, the ones who shot up
The Silver Palace from a rooftop one summer night.
In death you're not around as much as I might have thought,
So your reappearance was gratifying. Allow me to tell you
Some things: This lingering cold has now begun to break.
Someone, not a barroom angel, surprised me with the word
Expectorant. Indeed, stuff has been coming up. The gob
Of phlegm spit out on a city street but also the kind of
Brotherly love that made me miss you on waking.

In Naples, near Piazza Plebiscito, I sat with a man who
Could have been you, stunned and giving and mechanical
In his interests. He told me of the Camorra and their grip
On the city, young boys eight and nine fighting to the death
In the slum neighborhood down the hill. This fellow
Was known to pilot ships onto rocks but now has a clean
Bill of health and drove us past Vesuvius in his flimsy car.
Another anchored me to the reality of truth with his obsessive
Need for security. There are Americans on a nearby base who
Have never seen Via Toledo nor taken a ride on the funicular.
There are others who blow their trumpets past midnight
In search of the perfect note amid strangers who don't care
For them. It all depends on where you are as to whether you live.

The deaf, dumb, and surprisingly dead have been reaching out to me lately.
They wake me in the middle of some scary nights and expect me
To sit up with them. This I accept as my calling. It is the road
I have gone down with particles of intent. The stuff you showered me
With never leaves, even when I can't see it. Till the next time then.

October 2006

Brooklyn

I wonder about that photo of your brother
And what I was supposed to see.
Was it the force of his unspoken thoughts
Expanding his brow to dimensions
Too dangerous to overlook?
Frankly, his darkness spoke for him,
Finding a way to make a mockery of words.

When will we just walk in the garden?
When will we just remember it as it was?
Did the May time dogwood not teach us
What it is to be white as snow?

I am here now, on my feet and in my circumstance.
I am speaking to you, though for the sake of appearance
You are far above, in a space that clouds have yet to reach.

May 2005

Bookstore

There to buy, in love,
A gift for one
In whose heart
I sought to remain

I began to consider
Some writing of my own:
A pageant of stasis,
The open road ignored,

And pictured a man
Holding out his offering,
Corners torn, tape showing,
The wrapping pleading
For slight inspection.

December 2005

At the Door

In truth it was I
Who led you from
Those buildings static
Upon the avenue,
In their predictable posture
Of vertical prayer,
And the rampaging cars
With their brazen lights
On which we need not dwell,
Turning our attention instead
To the trees in the park
Bleeding into the night
And calling us to the darkness
Where difference cannot be seen.

April 2005

Bridge Traffic

And then there was the mystery lady
In the shades, saying she can't be
With a man who eats only vegetables
And practices funny business spirituality.

Below Fourteenth Street you take your chances
With people falling into mendicant ways.
Indigence reached a fever pitch in the tea café.
No wailing wall in sight, Aretha carried on
About treacherous currents in which
She had been plunged following her father's
Announcement the money would be going elsewhere.
"I'm deep in the vortex," is what she said,
And flat out accused me of practicing cruelty
To drowning fish—did I hear her right?—
For telling her to get a job.
Not that she lacked a point.

It was the Fourth of July and so we headed
For the bridge and the faux passion
Of the fireworks display.
My past accompanied me.
Memories of Ro, with her defining overbite
And her butt taxing her jeans the night
She drove me drunk over this same route,
Those Loggins and Messina guys singing
"Please Come to Boston" before the car wreck time.
Yes, they were in on it, too.

You hear voices and you try to listen.
The thing is it's now Tuesday.
My face is in the computer screen
And my ass in the swivel chair.
I'm centered in the work week,
Meaning the coast is now clear to make my report.

July 2005

Ascending

Taking the stairs slowly,
Her life narrowed
To the arduousness of ascent.
She now the only thing—
Not the book in my hand,
Not the train we had left,
Not the woman I was frantic to meet.

Some ancient rage summoned in me then.
“You with your long legs,
Run in the night
For the medicine I need.”
Those words my mother spoke
In the long ago, enveloping me
In the force field of her love.

You who were old
When I was born:
Rubber stockings,
A man’s sturdy shoes,
Varicose veins that turned your legs
To marbled meat,
Throbbing blue, blazing red.

And our slow walks through the station.
That sweet and grabbing smell
Of train and track,
The muck of ordure in the mix,
The ribbed linen glove
Over your small, thick hand,
The candied apples round and glassy red.

In the dimness of the bar we passed
Men drinking in the long afternoon,
Sinners every one.
Those comic books I reached for
At the newsstand
As a buffer from the Christ Jesus delirium

Of the pastor's oration.

Could they be saved or
Were they damned,
The men in the bar,
The men in the streets?
I asked you that question back then.
"The world has nothing that I want,"
You replied.

At the end of that endless station,
The steps you climbed toward
The light that you could find.
My life lived behind yours
Prepared to catch you
Should you miss your step and fall.

—*December 2004*

The Interloper Speaks

Yes, this is me sitting
In your father's chair.
What's that you say?
You don't like it?
It makes you uneasy?

I'm sorry you feel that way—
Is that not the current thing to say?

I am nothing like your father?
I am repressive and mean?
I have not earned your love
And frighten you with my fraudulence?

What's that you also say?
You're leaving?

I've heard that one before, my friend.
I've heard it all before.

October 2005

Waiting Room

When a woman doesn't love a man
And offers no possibility
Of its arrival,
She says it with her eyes
And the nature of her speech.

You must see the park in spring
When green abounds,
And in winter,
When snow covers all, she says.
And please, if you would,

Be patient.
The doctor will be with you shortly
To drill your tooth and provide
The pain that you've been seeking.

September 2007

The City Now

Specialness was not necessarily the answer.
Obscure texts were questioning the very idea
And we turned to them for consolation and support.

But there it was all over again.
The woman had just written a novel
While you had come from taking a leak
In Central Park to the sound of a young man

Singing an old Beatles song and another
Asking where John Lennon might be.
(You had a thought to tell him, but then a voice
Said that was enough of being good for now.)

If this was tough to take, an intruder
Entered your apartment and promised to spend
The rest of the night rearranging your face.
Gruesome. That's a word you heard your

Mother say, but no real clues can ever be
Found exclusively in the past. All we know
Is that the man was there and such men have
Been appearing frequently. How they get in

The door the dream never seems to reveal,
Nor what it is they ultimately take. Maybe
It is simply that they come and go without
Kindness or maybe, given who was there

Last night, kindness is not the matter to dwell upon.
You are feeling a tightness in your chest.
Plate tectonics, you often call it. Slight shifts.
A fault line somewhere in that cavity.

The facts are only these:
It is a bright and cool September day,
And stuff is happening at work,
Where Ms. Mean is all over you with things to do.

If the last expresses something of an attitude,
It is one you question less and less as you approach
Your sixtieth year, your pockets turned inside out.
These feelings need their arrival point,

And you honor them with acknowledgment.
Only then can God come in, you say.
This is no small matter, the matter of God.
Not when you have no one else.

September 2007

The Briefing

When I heard of your heartache,
I wasn't convinced we had an occasion for grief.
What little I learned was hardly newsworthy.

Lately a gentle wind has been caressing
The flowers here and about in this rough city.
Such acts of kindness are worth noting,
Whether from nature or we humans.

You might consider this a diversion
But frankly, your constant demand
For a reading of the distress meter
Is where tyranny too often begins.

So what if he ran off with her?
Rejoice, rejoice, as he has been known
To break hearts on a number of continents
And on clement as well as stormy seas.

I will say this: If I have made a hash
Of handling your hurt feelings, I will
Count on the elements to forgive me.

May 2007

Street Corner Hello

Or you see the man weeping across the room
And say you must go to him while ignoring probabilities,
The record showing he has an advanced degree
And can with a keen eye discern spatial relationships
Quite easily. Perhaps for the moment
You have lost sight that only yesterday his wife laughed
At you, yes you, and without mercy,
For carrying bags of groceries for no one but yourself.
At first you thought it was self-consciousness,
A noisy if unspoken admission that she herself doesn't cook.
Later it occurred to you that judgment—
Yours as well as hers—runs deeper than that
And people may be inhabiting bodies not their own.
Though it's also possible the reasons
For unhappiness are simply infinite. Take the lunatic
You sat with who called his live-in girlfriend a bonehead
While reserving the word "sap" for himself. Clearly the
Conditions are ripe for something, but don't keep repeating
The same mistake of running to others for additional information.

June 2007

Age Sixty

You say these things are simply the result of untimely speech,
Causing rank division to surface where none had been.
You say that she, your friend, has the chance to be somebody while
You remain outside the gates of contention. A lot of things are being said here,
Over a dinner of sesame ginger salmon and mu tea, compelling me to look hard
At the bronze sculpture of the glitter-eyed cat with its arched back and find
The perfect place for it on the floor. Remarkable are the heavens and the attributes
Of this higher realm that manifest here on earth, though we may not be saying
As much for long, given the weight of the bombs projected to fall.

Don't you as well experience the need to get things out of your system
By telling them as they are? Neither you nor I, if I may speak for us,
Has shown an interest in revisiting the past. For this reason I refrained from
Mentioning the cat lady, with her terrible claws, who intercepted me
On the street, though I did recall the one-time thug who was featured in my
Most recently remembered dream. Hell's Kitchen. Imagine that. We were
Sharing an apartment. Frankly, he just moved in and that was that. Mikey.
Such a signifying diminutive. He a forty-nine year-old case of arrested
development
With a stretch in prison behind him. What a strange business it was to have told
him.
Men generally share their dreams with their wives or lovers, wouldn't you say?
And now I am left with the aftermath of this impulsive intimacy. He too.
When I consider the matter, he has the face of a cat as well.
It's all a bit much for my little mind. I have no problem conceding
Supremacy to the universe. I believe, like you, it's for us to show up and do our
part.
I hate to end on a simple earnest note such as this, but it's what I have to give for
now.

September 2007

Friend

Under the gaze of a broken clock
I saw you this morning.
That plastic bag, those wrinkled pants—
Stuffed within your bloated being
A thousand poems yet unwritten,
Your face a blister-red warning light of despair.

You who burned down your house
Now offering an incoherent statement
Of unending pain in a language
All your own. All right, I waved hello,
The politic thing, but without breaking stride

Continued on my path, like all the others
Fleeing the fallout from your meltdown site.

August 2007

The Inmate

I will be heard, the man of silence says.
I will return from this arctic destiny,
Thawed free of the frozen pond.

I will hear the barbed wire speak
And I will say to myself, I have found you, sir,
In the confines of your eat-alone life,

You with your children never born
And your wife never had
And your family of origin

A shard-filled dream.
I am here now, sir, I will say,
Arrived on your trembling shore.

June 2007

Look

Writing a novel is too much:
Casting a net over experience
That yields no shape or form.

From now on let's focus on the day:
A woman staring jealously
At another who
Has won what she has lost

Or the homeless man
Begging for his daily bread
Whom we all just want to go away.

May 2007

Music Man

If it were your call, you would say
Nix on applicants with typos in their resumes
As we have standards to maintain,
Although such phrasing would cause sadness
Not easy to shake. No one ever said employment here
Should be a day at the beach or fun and games
In the old school yard, as you seem to suggest.
And do bear in mind that studies have shown
The stars can be reached even from our low height.
Frankly I am content to let go of the whole sorry scene
And disappear into the subway, even though
New Yorkers are always saying things like that.
Meanwhile the word *oblong* has come to mind
And *rhomboid* and *trapezoid* are now following,
As does Mr. Smythe, my tenth grade geometry teacher,
Whose glazed lips I didn't care for or the way he used
His elbows on the basketball court during scrimmages.
The trouble with walking is often the disappointing destination.
Don't give me that stuff about world peace, though if you mean
Peace alone I can go for that. I do believe some new
Beginning is only around the corner. I enter as evidence
The warm glow I received when I turned on
The computer this morning. If you will excuse me,
I'm headed for a blood test this very minute.
I could say more, but you know the deal.
Besides, there are all these yellow school buses brightening
The blackened streets and old folks staring at the young.
I'll leave it there for now, as someone appears to be coming.

September 2007

Dylan

Hard to enter the meditative space
After hearing him, but the stakes are high.
No drunken ascending of the Andes
On a weary llama, one hand waving free.
Just this crazy intensity.
Thousands of words a day like raw sewage
From a big and mysterious pipe.

There is always the river.
Why not heed its solitary call?
Has the right not been earned
To sit alone on the old park bench?

Still, this business of connection is alive in me.

Question: Why am I the one to leave the room
While others stay inside? What bonds have they
Established that antedate or outlive my own?
Ebby comes to mind, and all he stands for
In the way of excellence. I can't spend
My life saying it's not fair. That won't do.
Those words you spoke to me about faulty

Emotional dependency ring true,
Which doesn't mean my feelings don't often
Give me a workout. And yes, Michael,
I got your message. Even if you misspoke,
No damage was done, as you can only help.
The answers you offer are profound even
If initially unappreciated.
I will get back to you in the way that I can

And give you what I know. But I couldn't last night.
I'm counting on your understanding.
I'll read to you. You'll read to me.
Healing will take place. Learn to trust the future
By hanging in the here and now.
As for that, I just stepped on an old woman's foot.

Let's not misread the situation and make it
More than it is. Still, an apology is clearly due.

September 2007

Beyond the Walls

Everything has changed.
What that means you don't know.
You run the AC,
Hear anger in the voices beyond your walls,
Seek the safe spot within.

You say your boss is named the Terminator
For a reason and no one should argue
With your claim, lest they are seeking
A good fight and a bad one as well.

As for those wearing studs, you assert
The word sounds truncated and obdurate,
Like the fire hydrants around town.
When you run into them it hurts
And they are short on consolation.

There is way too much baseball in your life.
How is it you seek safety
In a third baseman's home run swing?
Don't you have anything better to do?
That is your constant if unkind question.

Now and then you try.
You take a walk. Read a book. Meditate.
But then you are back,
Lounging in front of the screen
Among the lotus dwellers.

My question is simply this:
When will you finally order
The wild salmon
With ginger tamari sauce
And sit yourself down to eat?

July 2007

*****July 15, 2007**

*Where did you go?
Will you not tell us?*

I went from room to room.
I went where the sun,
Driven to unfriendliness,
Could not find me.

I wrestled, if you must know,
With the idea of self-forgiveness,
For not being more than I am.
The idle on my little engine

Turned too high, I guess,
Bolts shaking loose from too much stress.
That is a little much for a Sunday, or any day,
But I came through with the help of a book,

Not a text of my own, but one
Someone sent me, from the state of Utah,
Where I had once driven up
From Albuquerque on empty roads

Away from the painted desert
In search of rocks I might climb with sneakers
On my fragile feet and no pack
To hold me back. While there I departed

From my vegetarian regime
And ate cheeseburgers in a retro diner,
Where, far in spirit from family and friend,
I wept at my nomad status.

It is evening now. The sun has been laid low.
I may walk far; I may stay near.
I will go where I go,
On streets I know too well to truly see.

July 2007

In the Mood

It's not that you're lonely but simply seeking
An opening for the expression of love

And to recognize its receipt in the face of the one
Who draws you to the place you saw her once,

She who took the measure of your passion
And asked for nothing more.

Now it's morning and you're stuck in this
Melting, imagining a wife from long ago

Dissolving into tears at your demise
With sweet remembrance of the nicer things

You did for her. It's all right, David, it's all right,
These currents blowing through you. You still have
Your feet and your legs and the motion they provide.

August 2007

*****Memorial Service**

You say you're planning to run in the rain.
Be advised that the face police
Are prepared to bust you for not smiling.
An alternate route is your best bet.
Don't say I didn't warn you.

It's true I was not myself at the service.
Sat there doofus-like in my polyester tie
And vintage Earth shoes advertising my aloneness.
You weren't much better, dancing a jig after shouting
That the deceased was done.
Other remarkable tributes followed.

The impulse is on me to visit that old cinema.
You know the one I mean.
I haven't sat in its darkness for a while.
I've a mind to go there and eat some peanuts.
Leave the shells scattered on the floor,
Like the monkey that I am.

September 2007

*****Naked**

This ache
For a woman's touch—
It grows and grows.
The one at my office,
Her lips blood red,
A crown of competence on her head.
Dutch.
And possessed of
Some depth beyond the ordinary.

We met for work-related stuff.
I did not speak well.
Gone the mystique
She had granted me.

The impotence age has brought—
A full sentence if you
Think about it.

Those columns outside my window?
Doric? Ionian?
There's a third? Corinthian?
Or is that the letter written by Paul?

Speaking of which,
I was there with my friend Jerry
For the dedication
Of the Interchurch Center
On Riverside Drive in New York City
By President Eisenhower
(he whistled while he worked,
making Stevenson a jerk)
In the long ago.
In the cornerstone
A fragment
From the agora in Corinth.

We had just come from the railroad tracks,
Where boys will often go.
We didn't shoot the president,
Nor did we want to.

Later Jerry died in a
Bowery flop.
Gangrene in both legs.
It had spread quickly,
As some things do.

January 17, 2008

In the Rain

I went to the store
In the rain for figs
And toilet paper. (practicality)

A birdie told me about
A boyhood friend
And her jumper with a crest. (history, personal)

The hooker's high heels
Followed after Haight-Ashbury,
Which they could not find. (fiction, groove)

The summer of love: a gold-toothed
Pimp who walked with a cane,
Though it was purely ornamental. (history, worldview)

A fat-assed frog who
Walked with
No one. (sheer gossip)

"I don't like
My niece. I have a
bad feeling 'bout that girl." (troubled mind)

"Those looks she feels she
Can give when I'm not looking.
Cuss that girl, she not careful." (urban warfare)

The Dutch woman.
Everything I thought she was,
And more, whatever that may mean. (gas)

January 18, 2008

Chronicle

It's been a difficult day. No question about it. A big block of fear sitting in my chest. Nonnegotiable. Incapable of being melted. *Ormolu, degage*—words found in Conrad's *The Shadow Line* cannot work any mitigating magic. Only now, sitting in the Newark airport, can I even think of putting pen to paper. What triggered the fear? You ask. An annual report assignment that could be the death of me. This morning I delegated some work, and in doing so could believe, if only for a while, that I was moving the project forward. Then I got an e-mail from Jen, the new temp. "Forgive me if you know this already," she wrote, about criteria for reproducible photographs. To that point there had been no written communication from her, which led to some idea that she was a poor speller, as some graphic artists are, and filled her spare time watching *American Idol*, reading *People* magazine, and otherwise occupying her mind with thoughts of displacing Angelique Jolie in the affections of Brad Pitt. But there were no typos and her sentences were all in order, correctly punctuated. Not only did she have the technical prowess on the computer that I lack, but she also had great verbal skills, so where did this leave me? I was saved by something Mike said. He suggested, with tears in his eyes, that vulnerability trumps power, that his life moves forward when he allows himself to heal, and goes away when he tries to be the man of steel. Perhaps Vance, a young man with a narrow head and the throb of a diesel engine in his voice, was the instigator of my undoing in volunteering that he was trying to grab something in the cafeteria before heading into a two-hour meeting. Later, I saw him at the head of the conference table with Ariadne, head of the graphics department. Whatever hopes I harbored for her love were dashed, as evidently she had moved into a wider circle. When I passed by again a minute later the door was closed, as if they were reproaching me for having seen them in the first place and making the point, if it wasn't clear already, that yes, I was correct—they did not want me. This is a lot to take in, I grant you, and an airport may not be the place to deal with all of it, but it's what I have for now. The main thing is this—at age sixty my coming obsolescence is writ large. I have to prepare myself for doors closing and render fruitful the long silences of the afternoon. But how to do that? What's that you say? The only way is to begin?

January 18, 2008

Between the Poles

You Europeans, I said to Maya,
The new designer,
You're all the same.
You make us feel childish,
Given your long history.

As for Byron, wizened,
His teeth crying out for whiteness,
He retreated to a bank for shelter from the cold.
What could I do but be with him
And sing a song from my childhood.
"Rescue the Perishing." It took me back
To a tabernacle in the woods
And an evangelical preacher with a toupee.
I spared him everything but the skinny.
Later we talked about Joseph Conrad, or I did.
Something about the sensibility
Of his main character in *The Shadow-Line*
Shocked me. His aesthetic revulsion.
Admitted how whole passages eluded me.

Byron in old age has a confessional nature.
Admits to dropping cinder blocks on the roofs
Of cars on the Mosholu Parkway
Before becoming a heroin professor.
Once went into a nod in front of his class
While lecturing on Milton.

If these are facts, where is the vault
in which I can deposit them?

I'm not feeling too well.
A cold has me down
And there's tumult in my groin
And a desire to quit my job and sit on a bench
And read old magazines. I just don't have time for being perfect
Anymore, but what does that even mean?

Some meditation on anger began this morning.
Like so many things, it had a short life.
Still, somewhere among these wisps and strands
There must be some element of continuity,
That thread to lead me outward from the maze.

I will tell the designer about the muffin that I bought.
Vegan: whole wheat and made with fresh apples.

Something to move the conversation forward.

January 2008

Let's Talk

You've been on this planet a long time.
You should be able to say a word or two.
A woman just spoke to you.
Doesn't that mean anything?
Stop trying to leap over hurdles and
Stand in front of the impediment.

“The problem isn't that I don't like Edith Wharton.
The problem is that your embrace of her
Is at the expense of others' enthusiasm.
As for me, I think I will pass on the BQE.
I've had it with roadways to nowhere
That promise to deliver New England.
Stay pat. Do a poop now and then.
Keep in touch with your own excrement.
Healthy relationships require contact.”

There you go, David—or whatever your name is—
You're no longer confusing love with a protein shake,
Like that nitwit nutritionist in the Hawaiian shirts,
Alfalfa sprouts growing out of his ears.
“Just give me a hardboiled egg,” you hear some old fatso say.
And maybe that is as good as it gets. Sooner or later this eternity thing
Has to get underway, as when we are lying in bed and it is
Suddenly there, the prospect of leaving our bodies, and the
Enormous shift in consciousness the very prospect engenders.

We have to ask ourselves if a middle-aged woman mired
In the throes of dependency on her mother is any more personable
Than a man on murderer's row stuck in a rant about
His departed father. We have to allow people to work themselves
Free of their issues without the weight of moral judgment.
And take the lash to your phony politeness, for crying out loud.
The question is this: do we want a mutual admiration society
Or a writers group that will explore the significance of
A tenant talking baseball with the doorman before
Heading off for work, taking his bald spot with him.
And the answer is emphatically no, the word *serious*

Does not mean what some would suggest
Or *respect* either, for that matter.

This has been a good day, even with too many
Ball bearings in the air.
And that woman's laughter when she saw you in pain,
As if she had waited so long for that.
It takes a certain brutality to live.
No one in the cafeteria crowd
Watching the Buddhist monks get beaten on CNN
As they munch on their BLTs should deny it.

February 2008

The Dead Armenian

For a stretch of streets there was a sense of freedom
Walking in the wetness of the city,
The strangeness of people apparent in their numbing numbers,
Three men abreast in the apparel of their industry
With flow charts the prayer upon their breath.
Nearby an arcade empty of civilians and a warehouse for the dead,
And the beckoning marquee of Radio City Music Hall,
The very name calling attention to itself,
Things as well coming forward in their strangeness.

The memory of my father simulating a parent,
Shepherding the lot of us across the indifferent avenue
To that very theater he had likely frequented alone.
Everywhere the remorselessness of rain when I think of him.

Forgiveness of a father is to accept he was not there
Except as he could be,
Dragging rocks and rubble from his stoning past
In a burlap bag the color of sin.

The density of the day that has had its way with you,
And then you remember what awaits,
Pausing in wonder
At the darkness beyond the gate.

February 2008

Museum Walk

Darkness calling
For the light
The museum
Is closed against.
Dioramas in no
Danger from the
Glare of streaking cars
Or the woman walking
Careless of her stride
As she intuits
Something happening
In the larger world,
A brief message in
A bottle floating
Toward the shore.

March 2008

Report

The old man saying
They want to knock down the hospital
And put up condos with a river view.

My sister in the psych ward
Of that hospital years ago.

I headed downtown.
Bought cookies on the way.
Ate both of them within two blocks.

Last night devoured four dollars worth of grapes.
Living large.

On Fourteenth Street new towers of glass.
Husky doormen standing guard.
Boxy SUVs parked outside.

All the old life dying.
Only that which glitters remains.

On the subway home
Thought what it might mean
To lie down with a woman I love.
It's been a while.

March 2008

Poetry Reading

I read my poem to a woman
Eating a day-old sandwich
In Bryant Park and said
More than she needed to hear
About my own two marriages.
Later I did the same at the Euro Diner,
Sharing this same poem
With a woman polishing her nails.
In case you don't know,
the Euro is on Thirty-Sixth and Third.
"I don't care," the cashier said, when I asked
About leaving a tip in cash
Or on my credit card,
Those three words a blunt statement
From her sullen heart.
Later I walked past Grand Central
And other buildings in the area
That hold their history in their gray facades.
A buzz came from the Friday night crowd
Crowd at a bar recessed from the street.
The intensity of the sound
was not static on the line but
connection being made.
A sign said "Keep moving"
And so I did.

March 2008

Hey

In my novel I tell you what
I did and when and why I did it.
At times the absence of a persona
Can seem like a problem,
This walking about without a mask.

My reflection in the plate glass window
Showed me dangerously thin.
A man of meager substance.
On hearing this phrase
I was reminded to keep moving.

A woman confessed her lack of faith
But her distressed demeanor
Was not for me to deal with then,
Say what you want
About duty and obligation and the like.

I met another woman. French.
The tunnel she sang in provided
good acoustics for her weak voice.
I pressed a button and together
We listened to my life story.

In the distance was a market
Where I bought provisions
Sufficient for the night
At my table for one.

March 2008

Kyoto Man

The blue lights illuminated the hunger
On his fallen face,
There on the bridge where we met,
Inky water far below.

“My disorientation was complete
When I flew back to visit.
The seventies would not be returning.
I had no choice but to flee.
Tell me you see what I mean,” he said.

From nearby I heard the sound of falling
Stones and imaged the outline
Of the grave that he had made.
I had contributed nothing.
The work was all his own.

November 2008

Appraisal

Sometimes you have to live with the abandonment of love
And dwell in the silent space of desolation.

Like the parking lot you proclaimed
The most beautiful you had ever seen.

What you really meant was that
You missed your mother.

These words that you speak, when will you
Finally understand that they have meaning?

November 2008

CCNY Poet, 1974

A Quonset hut to accommodate
The campus excess
Hic haec hoc and schoolboy blazer
Gone

A woman poet, her nameplate on the door,
Closing it firmly in terse rejection
Of his request for admission to her class.

His bewildered hair. His hurt eyes.

Outside the poet's door he writes:
"Sister, you were here
In a hospital of the long ago.
One of many in your troubled life.
Knickerbocker. Like the beer of that time."

"That day, with the advantage of your years,
You called me, then a child, across the room.
How my heart leapt that you would want me
Before your hand hard across my face
Put me wise to foolish notions
As to what your love could be."

November 2008

Seeing (FIX)

Don't you have anything better to do
Than to cause all this fear?
Yes you, my hyperactive little man,
Bouncing in your subway seat
As you eat your breakfast candy.

And you, my little tabloid rag,
What is this you would
Disseminate, your toxic stew of
Defenestration and rape,

Failed bailouts in failing states,
One black Friday succeeding another,
The bottom falling
Out of the bottom?

Enough.

At Work in America

Denise, I didn't tell you
The most important part
Of the book,
The holy relationship,
The one predicated on giving to get,

And yet I still ache for you,
The predictable result when attention
Given by the young is soon redirected.
Still, this longing has left me stunned.
The other night staring blankly into

The darkened window of Fortunoff the Source.
But the source of what? I would trade all the
Mineral wealth in Africa
For your love, or just your presence,
A witness to my balding head and long gone prowess.

Denise, I am here at work. My boss
Has whiskey on her breath and doesn't know
The heartbreak she is trying to conceal.
Weeping with their eyes while laughing with
Their mouths is an everyday occurrence in America.

Now Vinnie the maintenance man is asking
How the Giants will do in Dallas this Sunday
And breaks the line of my pause with fullback strength.
"They're going to take a beating
Is how they're going to do," he says.

Oh Jesus, Denise, would it cause you
To care a little more to know
That there are men who answer
Their own questions?

December 2008

Evening Song

Your singing moved me to another place:
Beyond the dire pain of old men
In white socks and black suits
And into the fading possibilities of a life
I haven't always known how to live.

The sheer fact that you were there, your voice
Penetrating the brick of an old building
And carrying into the dark awaiting street.

That song of longing for the shtetl of old
Had some correspondence to a feeling
That arises when I walk into my past,
Like the vanished drugstore down the block
Where Fulgencio broke Billy Tully's nose
For messing with his egg cream
In a sign of changing times.

Where did your height come from?
Was it your shoes or did you simply choose
To stretch yourself for the evening,
Your hand resting lightly on the piano,
Black and gleaming as your hair?
And that fire you sang of,
Was it your own or some premonition
Of a scorched earth? I'm sensitive
To these things, coming from where I did.

By the way, in the quadrangle outside
I cried some years ago in teenage angst
While my girlfriend held my hand.
Some concern about our future
Weighed on me. It was hot that summer.
The air did not move, as my mother would often say.
She wrote to me recently,
My ex, that is, thick and old,
From somewhere down in Florida.
Said she wanted to have more contact.

I'm not sure about that woman.
It's a wonder I thought I ever was.

Today's another story, Elana.
I'm watching out for falling hammers
And other harmful objects
From a dark inclement sky.

December 2008

Hey, Bum

I was living with an artist
Behind whom I could hide
There on the Bowery.
A loft, just so you know.
Cab drivers showed no respect,
Depositing me curbside
At the flophouse down the block.
Single-digit temperatures
That iron-cold month
I tried to get sober.
The covers pulled off
In the icy night.
A would-be murderer rattled the door,
Seeking to dispatch me coolly from this life.
A fire consumed our ramshackle building
As we slept, requiring dental records
To identify us. Some days I hid
Under my desk at work and walked
The lunch-hour streets as a pane of glass
Praying not to shatter into shards.
A pharmacy stood on Second and Eighth
Not far from the old Electric Circus
("I am the walrus" and all of that)
And the Grassroots Tavern, full of
sixties hippies on the sauce.
This bum came in off the street
And started kicking me
As I waited for a prescription refill.
The eye contact is what brought it on.
It took the pharmacist, old Mr. Minsk,
To get him off. He wasn't a bad bum.
Just a bum. His padded foot felt soft
against my shin. It could have been
He just dropped in to say hello.

December 2008

Sixty-One

My hair feels light upon my head.
Follicle follies underway.
Good God! My thin locks
Are blowing down the boulevard.
I had dreams about this, ample

Warnings of cue ball status.
My mother went bald too.
In her fortieth year.
First she lost her hair. Then came the dottiness.
It avails me nothing to talk this way.

Look! I'm cooking for my dog.
A soufflé yields a sudden song
of competent connection.
An ingrate pooch if past experience applies.
I know these doggy kinds.

Count to ten. I dare you.
Double dare you. Can you stop at
Three? Seven? Nine?
Liar. Bogus braggart.
I make a solemn vow to hurl no more names.

Freak!

I've said worse. Believe me.
You just clear out
Of this damn room
If you don't want to hear the rest.

December 2008

Extinction

That dream of lonesomeness.
To be spoken to that way,
Even in sleep. Some murky path
Trode in the muted, humid night.
Not a water buffalo in sight.

My concern about the New Year
Simply this: there isn't enough time
To take up the cause of trees
Against the chainsaws that pine for them
Even if I am those trees.

Hey, you, take my photo.
Make it sing that immortality song.
You know the one:
Loved by all,
Even the forgetful flotsam.

Have you heard the dilemma
Of the frozen pond?
Just thought I'd ask
In case you're planning
Some skating on thin ice.

Listen, Ludovico, I've had
Just about enough
Of your ballsy bluster.
Get a grip on your sandwich and eat it,
For the love of what's his name.

My problem is this—

What's that you say?
You can't hear me?

December 2008

Out Loud

Says “Well, I *am*,” to no one
In particular
As he ascends the stairs.

About the intentional bent toward oblivion,
A statement forthcoming—
The linked lunacy

Of the long forgotten.
Something like that.
Will serve him right for saying it

In the first place.
And the second and the third.
Do not invest in boldness.

The dividends are small.
To be talking in public that way.
What the neighbors might think.

Has no neighbors,
Only ghosts.
Shut up.

Raises his umbrella.
A victory for the righteous,
For all mankind.

Something like that.

Walks with vigor and vigilance,
Hearing the accusations of the many
While reserving his horror
For the triumphs of the few.

Pal, you don't win any awards
For reading James Tate
On the subways of New York.

December 2008

Notes for the Beheading

Something was going on above. That's a weak way to start, but it's all I have. Some momentous occasion as sensed from below. Words like *strategize* shot into the air, titles held aloft, the big picture referenced, and our leader speaking in balanced sentences. But my heart is not there. It is on the park bench with the pigeons pecking at the morsels they can find. A quiet space is needed to assimilate the present stock; the warehouse cannot hold more inventory. Last night I spoke to a roomful of the dead in a hospital lacking patients in a desultory stretch of the city that wounds me whenever I walk those streets, a reminder of a stagnant period in the past—the re-experiencing of the slow movement of a Sunday afternoon in November as I struggled to survive the shock of my physical apartness from you. An old woman with parchment skin awoke to say she knew me from back in the day. She surprised me with the world she presented, televised tennis matches from Down Under that allowed her to watch, in the full throes of lust, Roger Federer in tennis whites at 3 a.m. “Stop making your life my business,” I said, even as I told her of my two marriages, mapping the trajectory of decline of the first, and the risen-from-the-ashes miracle of the second, though I emphasized that the marriage had fallen away and only the relationship remained. All in all the intimacy was beneficial, even though I felt ill from its effects in the aftermath and realized what Gerald Durrell grasped all along, that people readily misunderstand each other. This is a matter of little consequence. The important thing is that, for now, I feel a little better. We can talk more about this later on.

January 16, 2008

Kyoto

Dark stretches of sidewalk
Peaceful glow of rice paper lanterns
Streets off the main thoroughfare calling
Slight seepage of light promising
Something.

In Tokyo I fell down
Two yards from my ryokan
Not all that far from the
Ikeburo station

Sick, not drunk
Bad tuna

Tomorrow I head for the mountains

November 2008

Family

I have a son in Indiana. A pro basketball player. I raised him all on my own (he doesn't know that). Last night he scored twenty-four points. I went to bed proud and happy, clutching my boxer shorts, with the night my own to live in. Earlier I ate a piece of sugarless, dairy-free chocolate after a dinner of vegetarian chili and brown rice. All through the day I was good to friend and foe alike, although there is one e-mail I didn't respond to, as it had the feel of presumption and trickery in it. A long absent son and world-famous author had a favor to request. Would I edit his latest novel, give it the loving attention only I can bring to his work? This from someone who has not spoken to me in years. It is best to discipline the presumptuous. I am not young anymore. It is all right to have the gravitas the years have given me. I can hear his mind reacting to the silence with rumination. I can see him looking at me in a new light.

January 17, 2008

Love Song

The weak bulb of an old lamp
Casting an unflattering light

On the dull sofa,
The worn rug.

Those piles of envelopes—
Manila sheaths for malformed babes—

On chairs,
Under chairs,
Everywhere.

Old nobody.
Old forgotten.
Old old.

Hurry.
Get on the floor.
Stretch.
Straighten that buckled board
Of a spine.

As a reward,
You can check out
The Web
For the escape
You are seeking.

You won't be the only one.

December 2008

Cows Come Home

At night you can't sleep.
Pages have gone missing
From the detective novel
Fallen to
Your bedroom floor.

The cows, you hear,
Have long since wandered off,
Pastureland abandoned,
The occasional breeze unable
To rustle up eventfulness.

On patios men disposed toward evil
Make corpses of frail souls
Quivering in queues,
Their arms hanging down
To bone-thin thighs.

Tiresome the towers that rise,
Seeking to exceed their significance,
Some critic shouting,
"Stop what you're doing; no one will listen"
Into your one good ear.

This is the circumference, ever expanding,
Which would envelop you,
Finally and frantically your focus turning
To the stars as the only way up and out.

December 2008

Coney Island

We were older now.
A season of dark shadows,
The grainy hue, the impression
More than the thing itself.

The strip was like that.
Weakened fertility in the rank darkness.
Diminished seeds of growth,
The way it sometimes is.

You made a mistake.
You climbed to higher ground,
Choosing elevation over safety.
Now you were where you weren't meant to go.

Men had followed after,
Holding pistols
With strange devices.
And you with no way down.

What would you say?
Would you importune them?
Enthrall them with a tale from long ago?
Ask them to define the end?

To yourself you had never posed such a question.
Always with the tendency to put things off.
Always with your mind on things to come
Except the thing that inevitably would.

December 2008

Consuelo's Wedding

The rusted rails ran past the wedding hall
Where Consuelo's blood-red shoes
Stuck to the bare wood floor.
Celestial currents rooted in fact
Unfold when weary men emerge
from thorny brush to share the history
of those tracks far from the marriage bed.

October 2009

American Boy

He never told me how he got out.
But then, I never asked.

He was fourteen when the authorities
Came to the family's home
For him and his kin.
A Turkish servant lied and said
They had gone out.

Such was the story
He shared with my mother.

He spoke five languages.
None of them were mine.

The bookstore owner
Where I found part-time work
At age fourteen
Took note of my surname,
Pushing on me a volume
Of Armenian history
He was sure I needed to read,

Not understanding the savage
Currents rippling through me,
The need to be an American boy
And turn my back on what was
And could never be again,
To be free in the open spaces
Of the red white and blue
From the killing fields
That elsewhere thrived.

At closing time, I boosted
A thick paperback,
Stuffing it in the front of my jeans.
Henry Miller's *Nexus*.
So the title was.

A close call, easing past
The owner's hawk-like gaze,
With the bulging treasure
I thought I had found.

October 2009

Hopper, 1941

Legions have been lost here,
Searching the bordering woodland
For the missing sweets of childhood,
Those creatures that came upon the lighted house
With a strategy for its taking.

The road narrow, the trio of gas pumps
A luminous cherry red,
The attendant focused on the task at hand.
The war is on, but his bald head
Says he is old for the fray.
Home awaits, the crackling radio,
The brio of some big band.

This is harder than you thought,
Imagining a time not your own
While trying to make it so.

November 2009

Falling (not for website)

I'm falling.
Did you think I wouldn't?
Falling off the bus.
Just falling.

Hey, Stupid,
A stranger shouts when I am
Almost clipped by a car.
Yeah, you.
Sing how your baby doesn't love you.
Sing about things in Glocca Mora.

Just sing.

What's that? He asks.
You have the feeling,
Not for the first time,
That significant numbers
Have vacated the premises
And you are virtually alone?

Maybe a young woman
You could summon to your death bed?

Good thinking.
Now go to the head of the class.

November 2009

Gone

Gone to the old movies I now am lost in.
Gone from infants crying in the night I cannot hear.

Gone that pastor from my childhood.
Gone his hairpiece in the icy waters.

Gone his aluminum-sided tabernacle.
Gone his gold rush to eternity.

Gone my sister's voice in accusation
That gone should be all the candy
I stole and also ate.

Gone all the tears I shed for you.
Gone to the grayness of my years.

October 2009

In Bryant Park

I want to go home
I want to sit alone
Without you
I want you to go
Across oceans
Over mountains
And return to me
Only to go away again.
I want you to maintain
The connection
I say I want to let go of.

September 2009

Bucks

It was right that we sat down over coffee even if we were moving in different directions. All that nervous talk about food preferences before we got there was bound to maintain us on a divergent path, given the disparity in our ages. Though I was not the big bad wolf and you were hardly little red riding hood, clearly there was a sexual charge in a sixty-two-year-old man sitting down with an attractive woman approaching her thirtieth year. And unlike the first time, when you had come to me with a problem, there was no clear basis for our time together now. Of course, you invented one, the “considerably older man” who took you under his wing and was now behaving in ways unseemly, or is the word untoward, and the dilemma this posed for you. Let me set the location. Ninety-fifth Street and Broadway, a ubiquitous Starbucks, or “Bucks,” as I heard you say. You opted for some chai concoction while I went for a grande calm tea and a reduced fat cinnamon swirl after telling you of a spike in my blood sugar. And so, maybe abstinence is the subtheme here. I had no words of wisdom about this older gent, saying only that it would play out in one fashion or another, the only requirement being that you keep your eyes open. Well, yes, I did reach back in time for inappropriate parallels in my own life, and really, if I have one regret, it would be that I didn’t tell you I had awoken that morning not feeling like myself, as my mother used to say, some dullness of the mind and dysfunction in my body making me less than suitable as a coffee companion. And yes, the hug we gave each other when our time together was done was completely artificial, we would both agree. Now it remains to be seen whether this mediocre showing on my part can be a platform to build on or a hole through which I have fallen into insignificance if not utter obscurity with you. And though here, the next morning, my spirits seek to rally with copious inventory as to the nature of the power I have given you, followed by a generous session of meditation, I am still not quite myself. A walk in the park is in order, sometime today, or anywhere my feet might take me.

September 2009

1970

When I was not a man
I walked with her
And talked with her
And called her my own

And did the other things
We do not say
So much about

Blood boiling
In the brutal sun
Of Barcelona's
Gaudi Park

Hotel room warfare
Her slapped face:
Once
Twice
Thrice

And the long-sleeve cover
For the multicolor bruise
In the white heat
Of noonday Madrid

Goya hiding in the darkness
Of the dingy Prado

Details dredged from a past
Present in the way
You look at me still.

May 2009

On the Way

The way it lingers in the mind

Looping round and round

Johnny Cash singing

In that level,

Gravelly

Soul-penetrating voice

In a Starbucks

On Forty-Third and Lex,

Sending me back

To childhood hymns

Whose words I have forgotten

And a church no longer there.

November 2009

Stuff (not for website)

No hot water with which to wash
My sweat-soaked shirt

Or dirty dishes in
A dirty sink.

Not liking this one bit.

Are you listening?

August 2009

Falling

That water tower high above
Had bad intentions from the start.
Don't try to tell me different.
That creepy way of inching toward the edge
Before its lethal plunge.

Crushed by a falling water tower.
Who would have believed such a thing?

And you, Marie, always wanting me
To come back down to earth
When I've been telling you all along
What can happen
When something does.

August 2009

Meditation on Truth

Nothing is more beautiful than Fifth
Avenue on a sunny September day,
The wayward farmer said.

Reading Robert Creeley is like eating
Old shoe leather in the driving rain,
The befuddled reader cried out.

“Am I going to die?” the cancer-stricken
woman sobbed, to a doctor thick
And pale and Hungarian.

“Not before you’ve lived,”
The crusty old bastard replied.

August 2009

The Green Car (Hopper)

You were on it or getting on.
I saw you.
Then you went away.

Drifts arose to meet
The falling snow.
The wind had a sinister sound.

Later there was a green fence.
Behind it my sister hid,
Especially in spring.
Only the musical ice cream truck
Possessed the magic to draw her out.

Next came the blood-stained street
As a statement of intent.
Bandits had taken over,
Boys with whiskey
Doing their bad boy thing.

Forgive me.
I am trying to understand
How light can go
And darkness remain.

February 2009

The Wee, Small Hours

When I wake in the night
My thoughts are of quakes
And the burial plot of rubble
under which I will lie, still alive,

Of metastasizing cancers,
Three-alarm fires,
Droughts and flooding,
Bombings and bereavement.

Downstairs, on the desolate street,
I hear a man cry,
“No, no.”

How did I ever get here,
And how do I possibly get out?

“Do no harm, David. Do no harm,”
I hear myself say.
These words I have spoken before,
Always in the dark,
Where so clearly I can see.

September 2009

Then I Went Out Walking

Then I went out walking
Along familiar pathways
Encrusted with layers of time,
Saying hello to water and air
And all elements exotic and plain,
Turning down loud music
That could not express itself
Without words. I sat in the boulevards
With the birds of yesterday, ate in diners
Past their prime, said hello to strangers
And welcomed old friends.
In the pastures of my mind did I loiter
With lilies and make them weep.
I had no time for pointless endeavors,
Choosing instead to stuff envelopes
With my own rich scent
And mail them to the great unknown.
I consulted with tyrants, promising
To be their friend with my fingers crossed,
And pledged allegiance to the flag
Of no surrender. I exhumed old goats,
Practiced smiling in cracked mirrors,
And stuck my head in gurgling bowls.
I had no endings and no beginnings
And the middle was dispatched with too.

I was simply ready for your love
Is what I am trying to say.

September 2009

A Casa

I pictured looming fields,
Rich earth seen from the hearth,
My heart desiring a door
Through which life would spread,
Envisioned flowers of the past
And summoned them to bloom once more,
Saw a wanderer on a lonely road
With a nametag on his torn chest
And liquor on his breath.
The wings of Mercury have fled, he said.
Still in my chair, I pondered the force
That had settled me there and grew content
As darkness came to sit and see what the distant
Morning would allow itself to bring.

September 2009

Poem Fragment

Heeding the silent suggestion of the night
He waits for her in the garden
Where the fruit trees grow, a stranger
With a mantra borrowed from the men
Of near extinction—

Male pale over sixty and stale.
Will she walk with him in the moon glow?
Will she be the daughter he does not have?
Will she pose questions he cannot answer?
Will she vanish before she has arrived?

Questions, not beggars,
Patiently waiting for the answer to arrive.

2006

Seen from a Moving Object

Where have you been?

The Palace of Thunder

In a young woman's dream
Content rich

A palace full of drunks in love with their own sound.

"Someone will soon be dead. At least I hope so."

"I do this stupid staring."

"What does reality have to do with it?"

"Stop confusing me with your questions."

"Lately I have been meeting up with aspiration.
Trust me. It is never a friendly encounter."

"What would satisfy you now? A good drink?"

"Enough. Infinity has a longer reach than that."

"Still, if I had only held the door for her,
She could have been all *mine*."

Here

I'm in the kitchen now.
By the gooseneck lamp I sit and read.
A collection of stories.
The author quite acclaimed.
I feel happy opening the book
To her energized prose.
The lamp provides a focused light
While darkness claims the other rooms.
This safety zone,
This little world of order on my table
Leaving me nothing for the moment
To fix or rearrange but only
To relax with my newfound friend.

2010

Shard--fix

The calendar
On the bare wood floor
Was what I saw.
“We must start over.
We must,”
Is what I heard her say,
Her foot upon
The month of May.

Snapshot

The desire was there to snap a photo
Of the woman with the almond eyes
Though long ago the world I sought
To capture through a lens began to slip
My grasp even as now the words
I scribble are insufficient to hold it near,
The time coming to simply listen
In silence for what is here.

2010

Looking at It (?)

People, the kind
Who grind
Their teeth
While sleeping
And munch
On barbed wire
For breakfast
Questioning
My courage
For noting
The space
I've entered
Gives me
The willies.

2010

Creatures

Sometimes you meet up with wild animals in the woods. Most of them won't bother you, though you may wish to carry a gun if you suspect they sense your fearful nature. And what do you do after dark? There's only you and those unseen visitations, the night speaking a language all its own. Then, in a city far from home and in daylight an animal of the wild, a coyote holding completely still, sits in your path, as if it had been waiting for only you, this in a period in your life when you travel alone, wandering here and there after your divorce, in that stretch of time between middle age and realizing you are old.

Penn Station---fix

The Lord she holds in her heart
His melting love her source for survival,
Crying out to him as once she did
For her drunkard father found dead in the snow.
The church is now a vacant lot.
Trains still enter and leave the station
But new stores now line the arcade
She once walked through
Wearing white linen gloves
And her polka dot dress.
In a nearby bar her son writes his memoir
To loud music. Having heard good stuff
About the place He had to see for himself.

Hopper, Did You Say?

The woman walking hand in hand
with her young daughter, the girl's face
turned upward as she breathlessly reports
on her day at school. Helpless the woman
is against the urge to stoop and kiss
the crown of her daughter's head.
A love like that, he thinks, trailing behind
with his errand to run, having seen
his cupboard is bare.

Remember This

In a voice like steel
on the southbound number one
he said the subway was his home
so we should keep it clean
for the guests he was expecting
the following day.

At the diner, Joey ate a huge plate
of turkey, expecting the tryptophan
to knock him out. Kelly hoped
To get laid at least once that year.

This a partial record of a day gone by,
to say I've been here before I'm not.

2010

Here and About

I responded to the call
“Next guest” with a request for
a splendid herbal tea.

With cup in hand I rode the bus by
the blooming park, saying to myself the journey
had only begun, and was warmed

that an attractive woman chose to sit
nearby, a genuine sign of trust and acceptance.
Good job, I said to myself. Good job.

At a coffee shop I favor I ordered a toasted bagel
when informed the chef had eaten all the oatmeal
in the house, making it a point to bury my grief.

As I walked the streets—yes, I did that too—
I pretended to be a train, making a whistling
sound at a volume no one could possibly hear.

Now I am home alone in idle conversation
With myself. Night has fallen on this city
And on me, and in this darkness do I sit and smile.

2010

Hopper

White was the light she saw in
So she wore it too.
When the uniform grew soiled she could
Always wash it in the boardinghouse sink.
This was an earlier time,
My mother working as a waitress
Up near the Canadian border.
If she looked severe
She had a lot on her mind.
They pushed her pretty hard,
Treated her like a beast of burden,
I'm tempted to say.

But things turned out all right.
The day she died she looked peaceful,
A quizzical expression on her face,
Like she was being told something
She was struggling to comprehend
But with all of eternity to figure it out.

Hopper (2)

My mother was waiting for me.
That is what I am trying to tell you.
She was not in the air but in the window,
Wearing white and wondering where I had gone.

To the seaside to stare at ships on the horizon,
I told her,
The surf inducing slumber,
Not even the children stirring.

To the Ferris wheel, I told her,
Where at a great height
I gained a worldview.

To places inside I did not want her to visit,
I said, with eyes closed.

Hopper (3)

The house a pale blue in the middle
of an ache-filled nowhere,
those rusted rails down the hill
placing no limits on possibility.
Only at night did the trains pass,
slowing in homage to the half open
window and even they defeated
by the awful stillness. The children
gone now, having hopped a freight
to a new life. Not even old enough
to read Charles Dickens and never
seen again, leading someone to write
an essay about permanence and
the open road. The kind of talk
one heard through the centuries,
we were reminded by Odysseus,
having read of him once, and
the wine-dark sea. Miss Sweeney
our teacher, her gray hair
in a bun even in spring.

God

God called today.
I hadn't been expecting him,

But there he was,
On the line.

Eric Clapton is God.
Your mother is God.

Yes, I understand,
You have heard all this before

And it is tiresomely simplistic.
Of course.

But sometimes we just need
To say the name God

To remind us of what
We are missing.

2010

His Everything

The way to read his poem
Is in a state of surrender.
Stop trying to figure it out.
Just sit in gratitude,
As when the pain
From that tormenting molar
Simply vanishes.

2010

Bill

Like my friend Bill saying he dated
an Armenian girl back in high school,
then asking me to speak a little Armenian
for him there and then. People do
what they do. Isn't that so?
Doesn't mean I have to get all crazy
in the head, does it?

This morning, in my journal,
I wrote out my delayed response,
saying to Bill that ethnicity is insufferable,
one tribe burning down the village
of another. Quoting or misquoting
Krishnamurti. And that other thing
about being a champion of federalism,
and where was Tito to knock together
the heads of those fomenting Serbs
and Croats and what have you?

Like I said. Crazy. Just crazy.

2010

In This Room I Thee Wed

The word *nefarious*.
To whom does it apply?

My friend Bruce I see
Yawning, mouth exposed,
across the room.
I will go and tell him
what he has done.

But there is no need.
He comes to me.
Just when you think
you are alone
look what happens.

“Nefarious. Have you seen him?” I say.

Good old Bruce.
He was hating me,
But that was last month.
You can wait anything out
should you summon
the willingness to stick around.

March 4, 2010

Get Over Here This Minute

Then the clock struck eleven, the way it
would, only this time the man came
with his gun and took me away.
Momma did not cry or raise a fuss of
any kind that I could hear. She was done
in the way some mommas can be with that
quiet finality that fixed her as hard.
The full moon showing a soft side
the man himself did not display.
Saying, as he raised his rifle,
here come the end of days.

A phony prophet, I would like to add.

Earlier, in the library,
I returned some books and CDs,
things neither read nor looked at,
at least by me.
Things in my care for a time.
This might be the place to spend
the rest of my life, I thought.

As Bangor, Maine, never was.

Later, at OrganicOnly,
in pursuit of roasted cashews
I showed impatience with
a woman in her senior years,
as am I. She called me
on my rudeness with her eyes.
Ping-Pong balls blown about
in a glass bin and bouncing off
each other. That's how we are.
We just can't stay together.

The kid at the checkout counter
wearing one of those message T-shirts.
that said "Just Deserts."

Had a tattoo of Satan on his neck
and fire in his eyes.
I think he wants to kill me,
Though as yet I have no proof.

Let It Be Noted

Subway horror of the kind that makes
you want to be gone from here forever.
A woman pinned between the platform and
an onrushing train when she tried to retrieve
her bag, which had fallen to the tracks.

This news via *The Post* in a cold March drizzle
as I carry my 24-hour urine sample into the medical lab.
“Get that thing off the counter,” says the receptionist.
Tempers are short in America. People looking
for signs of disrespect where they can find it.

Boston Track and Field stamped on her red sweatshirt,
she runs along the bridle path in Central Park.
The breath of life in her brilliant blond hair.
Somewhere nearby the gray museum
offering contrast with her rosy cheeks.

Some feeling of vulnerability
in the country right now.
That free-for-all intersection I just crossed.
The tyranny of the gas-powered engine.
Well, its day is coming.

These grocery clerks all give me the senior discount,
though I tell them I’m a year away from qualifying.
Some gift of the universe? Some reward for
what they may perceive as a kindly nature?
Or do they just feel sorry for me?

Heading home now with my vegan cranberry muffin.
A man with things to do and a place to be.

2010

Poem

Somewhere out there
people talking

Edifying
Exhortatory
Critical
Condemning

The works

A jogger in her running suit
chatting with her mate,
her breath condensed
and visible in the winter cold.

An Armani suited man
in executive stride,
signifying self-importance
with one hand in his pocket,

and I, with my sotto voce chatter,
at pains to keep the world from hearing.

2010

Poem

“If you so interested in women, why you don’t just find one?
Respect my space, man. Respect my race. How about you respect my *face*
and not be getting into it unless you wanting to meet me on the mat.
My homeys and me, we don’t play. Understand what I’m saying?
Silence be your penance for being born. Don’t be coming at me with your
loudmouth shit.”

I stopped in for a slice at a Zagat’s-rated pizzeria down on Third and Thirty-eighth. From there I withdrew funds from an ATM, some of which I sent to an ex-wife now living in Brooklyn. No need for any background story here. We’re all tired of telling them, Tired of emoting, just tired. Nothing looks the way it should anymore, not even a flower. We’ve come to know the score. We’re all just marking time waiting for *it* to happen. By the way, if *it* happens to be the Chinese, don’t count on them to preserve our history. I’ve waited too long to tell the world who I am. That is the sad truth, or maybe sad only if regret follows us into the afterlife and it turns out to be a screen we are hidden behind, tormented in perpetuity by our obscurity, like waiting off-camera for one more break that will spring us into the big show. I really don’t care for anything but the truth anymore, though maybe that is just another big fat lie as well. Earlier this week a naturalist spoke, chronicling the advent of her anorexia and relating it to the need for control. Fawning men praised her intelligence and storytelling gift, and in so doing demonstrated how craven desire can make us. I would like to think such hope strengthened me, and maybe it did, as I fired off an e-mail and backed it up with an actual phone message to Adriana saying, “You and I should get together. The time has come for you to step beyond your known world and into the abyss. Adriana, it’s simple. In one instant I lost my fear of you. I was able to match the sometime boldness in your eye with a boldness in my own. It’s wonderful when we retire our tongues and allow our eyes to speak, as they are more than a match for the former in terms of power and directness of expression. So let us be done with endless and meandering conversation, and ban such cowardice while awaiting the end of days.”

Driving Lesson

Ned, I really am trying to change, which is why I called rather than wait for you to come to me. And it did buoy my spirits to have this visit. I do have a confession to make, however. I took some pleasure seeing you from the street corner hunched over the wheel of your used car and losing it over having to circle the block several times before finding a parking space. You have to understand how unfriendly Manhattan has become to vehicular traffic. I myself have been hostile to cars my whole life, having been hit twice by them as a child. One, a Studebaker—remember those?—didn't even stop. Come to think of it, the second one didn't either. There's real guilt in fearing you have injured or killed a child, or anyone, I suppose. If I am to allow honesty to be my guide, the motor vehicle people made a mistake one year and renewed my motorcycle license to include the operation of a car as well. Jesus, you think you're going down one road with these writing sessions and then you start down another. I suppose I'm going to have to tell someone at some point, or is it better to leave well enough alone? I have been in this place of anxious indecision before and have somehow managed to move forward. There is this tendency for the mind to assail us, to drop a boulder onto the road as we are speeding along life's highway for the sole purpose of smashing us up real good. And so I'm suspicious of the mind's—my mind's—tendencies. Right now I am falling back on a mantra—I am whole and complete and at peace as I am. We have to go with what we've got, or whatever comes to mind—that word again. This whole discussion has been an exercise in bad driving, but maybe there is no right path, only some idea that such a path exists. I did direct us to the park where, as we sat, I pointed to the dozing old woman in the wheelchair with the eldercare aide beside her and said, "That's us in a few years." Perhaps my remark sounded harsh, but there is consolation in realizing that you forget almost everything I say anyway. It's sort of like those magic slates popular back in grade school. You could write and write on them and then lift the plastic sheet and every word would be erased. Remember?

Rat's Soliloquy

I was at a distance when I shot the photo,
her arms bruised by slaps from my own hand.
She had some warning I could be this way.

Outside the Prado she stood in long sleeves
under a beastly August sun.
I used a standard 50 mm lens,
though I had others. Later I bought a Nikon
movie camera, but she had lines
she wouldn't cross into terrain
that became my home.

I was stealing money and drank myself
out of law school before I could begin.
I slept with her girlfriends and read her journals.
I called down to women from our Chinatown loft
while I thought she was asleep. Her father
called us David and Lisa after a film
of the same name about two kids
who found each other in a mental hospital.
Years later we separated at the point
of a carving knife she had pulled.
Something I had said caused her to take exception.

On the bus today a young man trained
his Canon camera on his girlfriend's face.
There are no lessons to be drawn
from such a scene—just strategies for one's
own survival, doing the next right thing.

What He Said

The stranger rose and said, “Dry your eyes and accept the gift our dearly beloved has given with his passing. Picture some screwy Louie (me) calculating again and again the pension he can expect as a defense against the awareness of approaching death.”

Afterward the stranger stood beside an ancient dawdling by a woman on whom the stranger had his eye. No compassion did he feel for the ancient, only fury, that he should seek to thwart him in his quest. Sensing his interest without so much as a glance his way, she gave the stranger her artful dodge. Some women had his number without telling him what it was. The stranger in the silence of his mind had a number for her as well, reserved for those diminished by unexamined wounds and deficiency in the forgiveness department, the usual stuff on which deformity is built.

The stranger vacated the premises to witness folks young and old eating ice cream in public places, their bodies screaming for sugar to make their day, and stopped by the building of his high school girlfriend and heard as he did the years stating coldly the fact of their vanishing as a young man wearing the loud colors of his own vitality bounded up the hill.

The stranger, with precedent as his guide,
paused to address the passersby:

“How much I loved my mother and
feared my father and still don’t know
what deceasing means that it has
claimed all of my siblings.

Am I only partially here myself?

The road of sorrow and the ditch
of despair are not mine to dwell on.

Follow your breath, sit with your breath,
love your breath, spiral up and beyond
the desire to linger between a woman’s
legs or concern about the quality
of your penmanship in this time
of the many, many screens.”

His day had begun to wind down.

He was but a few blocks from home.

2010

Knife

His friend Albee sold him the stiletto,
with a six-inch blade he practiced springing
from the shelter of its handle on a troubled street.

A detective took him home.

His mother had a locked closet in which
she quietly disappeared the knife,
it being too big for any words
she had it in her power to speak.

2010

Easter Sunday

To be honest, I had to be reminded.
Every day is Easter Sunday, I'm likely to say.

"Do you believe in Jesus?" asked a man
with Christian leanings in Times Square.
"I am Jesus," I thought to say,
without breaking stride.

My sister called and left a message.
I have one—sister, that is—where once
I had four. Her husband a sweet if wounded man.
Genius in his genes but broken by the volume
of the world. "Tahiti," I say, when he asks
about my retirement.

Board books for two young girls.
The salesperson like dry kindling,
ready to go up in flames, a reminder
that my old self is waiting to return.

Do I purchase a bouquet of white tulips or
a plant for their mother's new apartment?
Suppose I return some months later and the plant is gone?

The fellow across from me on the subway
with an unfriendly face. The thought
that he is waiting until the car empties out
before murdering me. In warm weather
people seem more eager to cut loose.

Still in transit, I read about a cancer patient
whose body has been ravaged by exploding cells.
The pain that awaits some of us.

Please, people, no stabbings, defenestrations, etc., today.
Let gentleness fill our hearts and inform our tongues.

Travel On

A Starbucks in Berlin, down a ways
from the Reichstag, drew me in.
The woman, Japanese, was young,
half my age, if that.
On holiday,
she said, in answer
To my question.
I had a calm tea, as I often do.
She ordered a caffe latte.
Outside the November air
Was damp and cold.
It reached into my bones,
as did her words when soon
she said she would be going.

2010

Boat Pond

My back feels like a warped board.
At night I lie on the floor
and try to smooth the buckle.
My left knee hurts and a crowned tooth
is calling attention to itself.

Such are my problems on a cloudless day
as I sit by the boat pond in Central Park.
An old man in a motorized wheelchair passes by.
A father walks hand in hand with his young son,
the two having the look of life in them.

Nearby a choral group is singing
“Down by the Riverside.” Closer still,
some man, in a fit of spring exuberance,
lifts another off his feet and totters
near the pond’s edge,
perilously close to falling with his load
into the basin drained of water.

Where does such stupidity come from?
I allow myself to think,
before considering the story of my own life.
And now the man in the wheelchair is back,
possibly seeking connection.

It is Thursday, April 8, 2010.
I thought you should know where I am.

2010

Checking In

I am sitting with a bowl of week-old rice
and low-sodium beans right out of a can.
Earlier I purchased a chamomile tea
at a small café where I watched
a worker sweep the floor around me
and then sweep it again. I understand
the need for a job well done.
The world can seem to be running scared.
We put on the headphones and seek escape
in tinny music. Rock is virtually gone
From my life, except when I listen
now and then to Foreigner while on
my NordicTrack cross country ski machine.
In truth, I don't know how to download music
and the other day made a big event
of changing the ink cartridge on my printer.
On FM radio "Moonlight Sonata" played.
Silly me for not remembering the piece
is in three movements. Let me note
as well my reluctance earlier to walk under
the el while a train was passing overhead.
I don't want to be crushed under plunging metal,
and I don't want life to crush me either.
Do you understand? Do you really understand?
Why else would I still be tapping away
with midnight having come and gone?

2010

Please Understand

Today as all days I went out walking
not with an end in sight but only
for the joy of solitude in motion.
If man or woman or child or dog
crossed my path and circumvention
was required, annoyance or even rage
came calling as a reminder of that other
within and the goal I never fully embraced
to love my fellow creatures as my self.

2010

Another Time

When we don't belong with someone
they leave terse messages requesting
a rain check hours before we are to meet,
doing for us what we could not while
poised on the sharp point of ambivalence
with their decision a full day should be ours
to be with our self in the sweet sadness
of missing what might have been
so we can live in the familiar feeling
of regret entering the silence within our
hearing all these many years.

No

As now, when that look of loneliness locks
in your face for others on the street to see,
leading you into the park where runners
pass you by under darkening clouds.
You wonder where it is that she has gone
while fearing that you know, and so
the challenge presents itself once again
to live in this space between her coming
and going, the cycle endless since before
that time that memory can lead you.

2010

Fresh Air

Sometimes, like tonight, when a torrent
of thoughts assail us, we walk along streets
where others do not go, seeking the still place,
accepting that the time for silence has come.

How long those years when our thoughts
were not our own.

But we are not there anymore.
We are free, strolling about,
gazing in windows,
paying no mind to what we see.

Move It

The psych ward called to one while another
broke her heart on rocks of ancient enmity.

I was tortured by their sharp decline.
Wounds bound me to their dismal fates.

But free among you I now walk on streets
unvisited by the gawker and the goon.

I am here, within the population,
doing what I do

and hearing and saying
what I can.

The jailer came with bars for me.
I told him not today.

The dreamer came with stars for me
I sent him on his way.

2010

The President

At break of day he arrived,
asking for our minds and hearts
as I stared at the leaves and grass
so extremely green through tinted glasses.
That same morning I entered a diner
and ordered takeout tea, leaving
a dollar in the tip cup, remembering
where I came from, that lengthy time
of servitude to an unforgiving world.

2010

Friend

Because safety exists on the margins
of his power, where he can't extend
into the core of who you are, his vision
elsewhere than on the personal anyway.

All the while you secretly measure
the disparities:
his childhood summers diving off tall bridges,
his infantry stint where guns were blazing.

But now, after all your flatteries
and fearful conversations,
you feel him, blocks away,
looking through walls,

through all the obstacles
that distance can create,
to find you where you are.
The door is open.
There is no one to close it now.

2010

Columbus Avenue

I'm defeated
You win
I give up
I don't care
Take the whole
Mad thing
Away

2010

Hoo Boy

The Manhattanite
had seen the film before
though he only remembered
halfway through.

Once again
he was reminded
of his attenuated place
in the universe.

It is said such things
are common
in the course
of growing old.

2010

Overheard in Passing

At the window to the world
The woman stands.
Some things are known.
Some things are understood.
Her love for you is one.

2010

Family Affair

My sister died last night.
She leaves behind a broken son,
stashed in her house for years.

My remaining sister says,
“Such great hair you have.”
“Enough,” I reply, in retreat
from the web she seeks to spin.

2010

Number One

The flag men and flag women
wave their flags from passing cars
and in the streets, violence
in their voices as they make
their noise and in their
faces as they smile so angrily.
You place your life in their hands
should you dare to look at them.
Stay out of sight when they are
in this state. Allow the fever to pass,
thinks he who also thinks, but doesn't say,
"What are you looking at, mister?"
should a stranger turn his head his way.

2010

Speaking of Which

Spare us your opinion.
Place a check on your
fathoming impulse.
If you must focus,
do so on the wind.
The girl lived on a leash
and felt the heat
of an irate pimp's love.
Run along to your mother now.
Enter and say,
What's for dinner, Ma?
and call it a day.

2010

Hopper, Coming Soon

The house was hard
for us to reach.
The light on the water
hurt our eyes, coming
from where we did.
All of us in black.
Those who sang
Their songs of innocence
at the water's edge
had no need of
the little we could
possibly offer.
Best for them to shrink
from our very sight
and pray for the safety
of the clandestine night.

2010

Cool Jerk

It's the trench coat.
Belted.
I used to wear one too.
America was singing back then.
I wasn't,
But America was.
I want to be clear about that.
I have never sung
but America,
America never stops singing.
This is true.
You could look it up
if you don't believe me.

His name was John Lindsay,
by the way.
John *Vliet* Lindsay.
You could look that up, too.

2010

In Transit

A high-functioning express that tallied
the stops to our destination,
the lighted itinerary showing
where we had been and where
we now were going.

There is safety when trains run true
on rails with an obedient nature.

A street named Albemarle, laid out
on the straight and narrow, awaited us.
A tree-filled median strip bisected it.
With longing do many sigh for the life
they did not live under the Brooklyn sky,
the mystery of being lost to time
in the borough's misty nights,
the manner of discourse
a gas-lit promenade inspires,
waking to nature in a dense metropolis.

But that was not our fate or seeming purpose.
In a room full of men we acknowledged
we had lost our way, making of our life
an open book. Of such things our days
are not always made, but when they occur
a door tends to open that inevitably leads us home.

2010

Status Report

When you go down those stairs
there is no thinking of where
you are in relation to where you were,
so much have you been there
without those you have not seen in years
except in dreams recalled on drama-free nights.
Nearby someone weeps at the memory
of Carnation Milk and the early closing
of all the stores. Martial law has come,
the men with the big guns have come,
and still people take to the streets believing
beach day is just around the corner.
You're tired, you say, but do you
even know the meaning of the word?

2010

Friendly People

He came over.
He said he wanted to talk.
What do you mean, talk?
Talk is talk.
God. The wife he didn't want.
Something.
Like people often do.
It's not a crime.
You, in your life, your nonlife,
You never wanted to talk?
What, I hurt your feelings talking about
Your nonlife? It's just a word.
If it makes you feel better,
I'll drop it. How's that?
Get out of my house?
You want me to get out
Of my house?
How about you get out of
My house?
It isn't my house?
How about your mother
Isn't my house?
My advice to you, buddy?
Go down to Forty-second Street,
The old one, before they cleaned it up,
And act like the whore you are.
How about you do that, and now?

2010

Play Ball!

A pitcher he's never met
yet lives and dies with.
Six runs in six innings,
every other batter stroking a base hit.

Phil, what are you serving up there, beach balls?

Those beach balls of his childhood,
multi-colored, like Joseph's coat,
and the slavery that followed.

2010

Mad Men

Silence enduring now.
The muffling cloak.
No words heard,
no reaching into the long ago.
The Alamo gone,
Forty-second Street gone,
home movies of your distant past—
These gone too.

Only a voice, saying,
“Step this way.”
You are theirs now,
those standing by your door
calling on you to come out.

2010

Faites Attention!

When you didn't call.
We denied our self
the right to a full sentence.
Who would want to hear
If you yourself didn't?
The sky as vast as your heart was small.
Such was our judgment.
A movie theater made an appearance,
as did a conversing couple.
The madness of their happy sound.
"Go to France. Go this minute,"
they instructed. We listened,
having no choice but to take
direction from wherever now.

2010

Canandaigua (NB--Add this version to Love Song)

She had been crazy on several continents.
So she said. Personal history being big,
she offered hers. It went like this:
She had an interest in plant life
but was afraid of nature.
And yet her life was not a contradiction
but a straight line to oblivion,
She assured one and all.

It was clear we had a strong spiritual connection.

The stars were out.
She snatched aurora borealis
with one hand, as if it were a firefly,
and said she had a mind to threaten
the planets with her reach.

Statuary were glowing in the dark,
lighting up a nearby field.
She called in the sex crimes unit.
The investigation remains ongoing.

Those plaster figures? Lady Love
deemed them radioactive and posted
a Stand Back Thirty Feet sign.

The things some people will do.

I held off from declaring my love
as the coyotes approached.
Their yellow eyes signaled depraved hunger
And desire for a personal relationship with our flesh.

At night the chorus of crickets
Kept me from sleep.
A failure of conviction I detected in their sound.
Some weariness brought on by the daily round.

The woman killed me.
Not right away.
Her boyfriend was her bullet.
Where she met him I don't know.

Far below a train whistle blew.
I started down, following its sound.
It was that time again.

2010

Graymoor (NB—add this version to Love Song)

I am in a room.
Actually, I am not there yet.

Say it again—actually.

The room will be hot
or no, tolerably warm.
It will be what you get
for the money you pay.

Men will be outside
and some women,
though not necessarily.

Say it again—necessarily.

I want their applause.
I want their love.
I say I don't
but I do.

Positively!
(Leave it alone. Leave it alone, I say.)

I am hungry now.
Could eat a hundred hot dogs
like that Japanese hot dog eating fiend
in the newspaper. Bloat up real good.

But I won't.

Hummus,
an apple,
an orange.

Outlive all of you.

Seriously—you're on your own.

I say I want to die
but I don't.
I take DHEA.
I take vitamin C
and megadoses of D3.

All kinds of stuff

Will be a monkey's uncle
(Have you ever met one? Tell the truth)
if I eat a lot of croak food.

I am preparing for death
so I can live in a continuous dream—
like an endless movie.

I am on the runway
Preparing for takeoff.
What's that you say?
I'll say anything?
Hah to you, and hah again.

A woman directed me
to my floor.
Truthfully (it's back)
I did think of sex
but I am under instruction
to pay no attention
to the body.
None whatsoever.

Truthfully (live with it)
I regretted not having
my laptop, my only friend.

The room frightened me.
Took me back to childhood,
those lonely, homesick camp days
in the fetal position moaning

Momma, Momma
as the rain beat on
the leaky cabin roof.

You know where I am going
with this song.

But then I unpacked and bore
witness to the material goodness
of my life.

My once-white sleep shirt
now gray from overuse.

A stranger I had once known
came from a bathroom stall
to inquire about my health.
I warmed to him
as I washed my hands.

(PS—the directive from on high
is to never use the adverb *then*
as it makes you a bad person)

In spite of the daylight
thugs gathered in the parking lot,
intent on conjugating the verb *avoir*.
Sensing finally (*let it go*)
there may be meaning
in the meaning.

A different time has come.
Opportunities for growth
always occur when
the bells stop ringing.

What is this season of unrestrained joy
we have come to when greenery
and telephone poles can abide together

so movingly.

Please, people, let us not argue.

We're Waiting

If I had it
would I not tell you?
What of the rain?
Do I hold that back?
Or the wind?
Or sunlight, for that matter?
Am I not free with the gifts
that are not mine to give?
But let me not swamp you
with questions
or struggle for explanations
unavailable
to a mind as average
as mine.
Just sit with me
in silence
and let the answer come.

2010

Out with It

Their love gone elsewhere,
another chosen for the prize.
My rejection slip life,
called and not chosen.
What does it mean?

There is freedom in failure,
the freedom to look at planes in the sky.
So I could say.

The closed door,
the silence imposed,
this neutered state,
the strawberries I don't eat
and the poison pills I do—

Do not make a federal case,
or do indict me for ingratitude.

When I say
may the Broadway bus bash you,
may a scorching meteorite claim you,
may illnesses beyond description ravage you,
may all that you have received
be taken away,

do not see me as unkind.

When I say,
how dare you gain everything and leave me nothing,
how dare you make me burn and burn inside,
how dare you make me turn to this, these words,
for my salvation,

When I say
I am tired of this pain,
this cloak of invisibility,

this Buddha pose I cannot possibly maintain,

see it only as a groping for perspective,
a trail of litter I leave
as a marker on my journey.

2010

Let's Talk

The volume of poems I was reading en route to the prison annoyed me. It may have been the smug smile on the face of the poet as he appeared on the back cover of his latest volume or one too many bedroom scenes to let us know his love life was intact. But then he tallied the number of war dead—Korea, Iraq, Afghanistan—and won me over with his display of seriousness about the common good. The prison experience was OK, even if none of the four hundred inmates showed up in the day room to hear me share about things that saved my life and could conceivably save theirs. Bedbugs have become a problem in the city—ten percent of homes are infested with them, and now the citizenry is being bitten in movie theaters and restaurants, but no such infestation of our correctional facilities—there's a name—has as yet been reported. A clever Indian man with a title appeared and instructed me to do better. I listened respectfully—this is true—and found myself in agreement. Still, all the while he spoke I wanted him to go away, as if we both were actors and knew it. Plus he was wearing a tie, a good and radiant one, while I had thrown on a faded madras shirt that revealed my chest and neck to be as insubstantial as they truly are. We get trapped in poor body image and other personal sorrows and cannot see Korea, Iraq, Afghanistan. That may be particularly so in Manhattan, where even the young and beautiful and gifted are incredibly unhappy. We sense something is wrong, that the wrecking ball is on the way. But the greater problem than body image or imminent demise is this dislike, ready to flare instantly. The poet mentioned a field guide to flowers to my dismay, given my understanding that the names of even the obscurest flora are native to real poets' tongues. The good news is that Phil Hughes won his fifteenth game of the season yesterday, holding the Tigers to two runs over six innings. Cabrera unloaded on him for a two-run dinger in the first, but that was all she wrote for the boys from Detroit. Phil turned twenty-four in June, and I hold him in my heart as the son I never had and bask in his accomplishment. Look, let's put aside the psychological profile of the likes of me and enjoy the day. Yes, the temperature has reached ninety, but the humidity is low. A day for a walk in the park, wouldn't you say, though watch for falling branches on the footpaths, as even the trees, in recent times, have begun to show their dark side.

After Seeing Godard

Sadness diminished her beauty,
the words she spoke tangential
to the general discourse and yet
an effort to keep her spirits up
in the cafes and on narrow Parisian streets.
The desperation she conveyed
in that world when screens were fewer,
seeking to reach into the minds of others
and resist the imprisonment to come.
Those construction cranes all about,
like gangly birds, and the soul-
destroying flow of traffic under
the bridge. Displaced by the gods
that would rule us and wondering
if she would ever make it home.

2010

All Right Already

God spoke the other day.
I have been meaning to share this with you
but the tasks of life got in the way.
Cease your futile efforts.
All your escape routes have been
greased to ensure your fall.
Things of this nature he had to say.
That he should seek to impose such a halt
on me. Or maybe I misunderstood.
Perhaps I will wait outside heaven's door
for permission to show the sorry text
I prepared for him and all of you.

2010

Convention Talk

We walked away from love, the whole crazy mass of it,
the longing to return setting in on the side streets we visited,
all of them with their old age on display. For the first time
the value of the offering was called into question,
“What is lost is lost,” someone heard to say,
while another exclaimed, “This is assault
with a deadly weapon.” Stores come and gone,
entire families vanished, their goods dispersed.
Still another spoke, saying, “Is that not the point?
Dying is in. Everything is about that now, even
your fading breath. Our day is fast coming, so why not
choose wisely? Do you truly wish to pass
the hours in a hotel lobby watching women
long familiar with the words *ulterior motive*?”
In fairness, this was a lot to think about,
and so we continued our journey, competing for space
with cyclists displaying varying degrees of aggression.
It had become clear that laughter, while not the problem,
was not quite the solution either, and we took
strong comfort in the discovery that Times Square,
the once out of control sinkhole, was not now
the entirely glitzy disaster we had feared,
cruise ships being next on our list for reevaluation.

2010

Hear Me

A man is speaking
even as I drift
into the clouds,
ignoring his dismissal
of me as one
who cannot relate
to terra firma.

Now it is I who is speaking.
Hear me say,
“David, would you like
a cookie?
How about two?”
And hear David reply,
“I would like that
very, very much.”

The cry of loneliness
Is not a loud one.
It is heard in silence
all throughout the world.

Nietzsche said that
or Hoagy Carmichael,
or some cosmopolitan
flying by the seat
of his pants.

So I have been told
by those who pass muster
and have been entered into
the archives of the universe.

But this I say to you.
Nomenclature and numbskulls
have been known to go together
as have nonsense rhymes
with paradigms of justice,

and bootleg tapes are everywhere
to be found on Nevsky Prospect
with the drunks half dead in their dreams.
Summon the will to live
and let it float free
on the waters of your mind.

Gentle the breeze
of insubordination can be
if only you will let it.

Arms of the righteous
and the folly of
the snaggletoothed one
are all the same to me.

Again

Invisible

you must never

ever

let me be.

Are you listening?

Listen when I speak.

Tell me that you are.

Repeat what I have just said.

Do it now.

Please.

Mourning Glory

I saw a film last night better than
the reviews it had received.
I brought in store-bought popcorn
and with the lights turned low
began to eat my smuggled fare.
Handfuls I scooped into my eager mouth.

Sunday is a delicious night for movie-going,
and yet it's money, you know, and time.
With death on the horizon,
are there not things for me to do?

Go away, old men, go away, I thought,
of the pair sitting close by.
Your mirror is not wanted here.

And yet the comfort that darkness can bring.
I bent down and cuffed a pants leg
So I could have this secret for myself.
Yes I did.

Darkness a friend that you must want
more than any other.

But then a stranger came to you
there at the bus stop
and stared into your eyes
with a look of longing
you met with boldness
not normally your own.

On that bus you spoke with her
about the film you both had seen
but let her go into the night
with no thread of connection
sufficient to guarantee
you would meet another time.

Once again you were
in that place of pain
that not even
the darkness could hide.

Stone

Shut for the night
were the big brass doors
of the old stone church
where a man from my past
some years before had been eulogized.
Gray not a zone for him to linger in.

Overhearing me state a preference
for a candidate for office,
one not to his liking, evidently,
he had only this to say:
“I hope your choice doesn’t
have to ruin our friendship.”

Those the last words he ever spoke to me.
He had a viewpoint, fiercely held.
Having made himself, others should do the same.
He died of cancer, and though I will not say
he was destroyed by his own hate,
it can seem that way to me.

I thought of him on that evening,
as I hadn’t in some time,
sitting in a Korean restaurant
eating soup whose name I can’t recall
here in this city of old, old memories
and its ceaseless parade of passing faces.

2010

Vanished

Momma did not go into the snow
but said, "You with your long legs,
run now, that we may not,
in days to come, be homeless."
The wooden house shook
with the sound of her unrelenting pain.

It was a long time since she had
a real husband and I a real father,
the old drunk coming home mean,
finding fault with even her breathing
and tying the air in knots.

Some days later the car came along,
too squat for a hearse but black
and resolutely slow and meaning business,
as if even time would now have to
step aside and simply watch.

From both sides burly men climbed out
to take my father for a ride.

I was not there but down in the big city,
where I drifted among those who drank
their wicked fill and spoke with easy
assurance of killing fields past
and present and still to come.

October 2010

Soon

Alone now
a trial run at sleep.

He hasn't had time to finish.
His life. He hasn't had time.

Someone got the best of him
as he always gets the best of him.

People getting the best of you—
and the worst.

His computer has died.
Hard drive kaput.

Do you know?
Do you care?

At Oktoberfest he went about
with a guy who doused himself

with gasoline, then lit a match,
this in the long ago.

Now there is a lot of long ago.
If only he could find them.

Where are you, long ago?
Come out, long ago.

In his pajamas, seeking
for that long ago.

About the future
he blazes with indifference.

Give me the long ago,
he says. Give it to me now.

Or yesterday.
But give it to me.

In Munich he read *King Lear*.
In Vienna he read *Hamlet*.

In broken Budapest,
he read *Letters to a Young Poet*

and saw the blemish of plastic
signs on old and elegant buildings,

the whole country gone fat
on Krispy Kremes.

Shredded wheat, he screamed in his sleep,
waking everyone in the rundown hotel,

then protested, I'm too old for walls,
When they tried to quiet him down.

Give me some love, he writes.
Give it to me now, on the double.

The black cat watching,
from behind the ficus tree.

“Are you listening, child?”
he asks. “Are you listening?”

2010

Listen*

He had a way of holding his forearm
To his boring nose so he could smell his blood.
No such statement of purpose did he make.
It was but an understanding you came to
from the things he dwelt upon.
“Your blood is rotten, thin as water,”
he would say, his smile malignant.
Some hurt he felt that I had escaped
the angry eruptions his skin had been
afflicted with. The punches that he threw
payback of a kind for stealing my mother’s love.
So he didn’t say but I somehow knew.
My father’s he found in the paternal fist,
the wingtip shoe, size thirteen,
to his adolescent face. I wondered
why he sought the old man out and took what
he received, why he did not disappear
down the freedom path like me.
If in later years he hit the road
he fathered children along the way,
for years and years his silence speaking for him,
his family of origin left in the ditch it had blindly dug.

He came back when he could, out on his feet.
The Pillsbury doughboy he resembled,
rising from a chair a logistical operation
performed in stages. A wife with a battered brain,
a bullet to the head from her ex-husband’s gun
and children dazed by his drunken blitzes.
Jobless he came dependent on St. John’s Wort
for the maintenance of his detached disposition.
Soaked he stood, umbrella-less,
when I met him one afternoon. The sun
would dry him off, he said. I was not
my brother’s keeper. Afraid I would catch
whatever it was he had, I kept my distance,
though closeness had, in truth, been lost
with the years.

Those one-word responses.

Those empty stares.

On the tarmac of a parking lot
surrounding a supermarket
somewhere in Florida

he fell,

having arrived from New York
on a Trailways bus to help his teenage son
in flight from the hellhole Bronx,

subways stations serving as toilets
the corroded el
broken streets and old forsaken souls
drunk behind their triple-locked doors
on beer and wine and the *New York Post*.

A son abundantly engaged with life
And clever enough to make it happen.
Wanting to help that son.
Could not but heed his call.

The nearest hospital a hundred miles--
That's right, a hundred miles.
A shithole state if ever there was one.

"I'm not ready to die. I'm not ready,"
his last words, as the tardy copter
lowered to medevac him away.

The Day*

Today I stopped for a container of Starbucks tea—
“Next guest, please”—before heading
to a high-security college, where even
the bathrooms are under lock and key.
There I spoke to a roomful of students
on the topic of waste management,
bells and whistles, the hidden
meaning of the word *plethora*,
and why its sound can trigger instant animus
from a mouth poorly shaped.
Later, at a favorite restaurant, I emptied
half a bottle of ketchup on my veggie burger,
then stopped at OrganicOnly
for two bananas, a grapefruit, and a bar
of dairy-free chocolate.
Back home I checked my e-mail
and typed up some notes.
A good snooze on the sofa followed.
Sleeping off the effect of all that sugar,
no doubt. Sugar is a drug.
Remember when we used to say that?
Night has fallen and I may be in for good,
though there is some temptation to step
outside. I’m trying to take it on faith that
something great could happen if I just stay put.

Recondite*

It's no good, we said to the wind and the rain
and all elements creating fissures within.

No good. No good. How long
before the message would be heard.

Another day, another dollar
Is not spoken here.

Articles of faith are not always
part of our apparel.

The black cat watches.
The philodendron pacifies with dark green leaves.

A photo of some we once knew has now
Been faded by the bleaching sun.

Do whatever suits your fancy.
Do not say we did not warn you.

And don't pretend you have no idea who you are.
Don't do it, we say.

Silence, says the lamb.
Silence, says your mother.

A man needs a starting point for his pain.
On this we are in complete agreement.

The pain Johnny felt was twofold:
Had he people-pleased the night before?

The second is lost, utterly lost.
That can happen on a Friday.

The rain is falling outside
our window *sans merci*.

That's right, an ice cream parlor.
Though we never availed ourselves of its *product*.

Just one of those places you pass by and declare
"Jesus, we're happy. Aren't you happy?"

Potty Head Speaks*

Today was the day I finally bought
the potting soil. Size was an issue.
The only bags I saw in the store
were huge, but then one of the staff
pointed the way to a smaller quantity.
Oh happy day that excess was spared me.

He showed impatience, it is true,
but each of us has our moments,
and as a retiree, I know too well the pressures
of the work world and what they can do
To those who must still earn their daily bread.

Lazy bum. Slacker. Goof-off. Impostor.
Such names as these I hear myself say
when thinking to that time
when I too was part of the daily grind.

But what is done is done.
That's what I say to all those Harrys and Janes
Who want to look under every rock
For every little thing they think
You or they have ever done.

Forget about it, like the gangster says.

So I bought the potting soil,
but I also added a six-inch pot,
Because that was on my list, too.
And a saucer as well to catch the runoff.

They are important, those lists.
They give focus and meaning to each
new day we are given.

Well, I took my purchases home,
and transplanted my little green thing—
No, the name eludes me, though I

do believe it is part of the philodendron family,
And few plants are hardier than those.

Isn't it just wonderful when we all have room to grow?

Where Something Happens

The woman with cat whiskers claimed
to have burned down the house
with her mother and all her siblings in it.
Only her father, who had gone
into hiding, remained. Today they are
the best of friends, ancient enmity
healed through a mysterious process of amends.

A man headed for oblivion
proclaimed himself a shooting star.

Another stood at the door
saying hello to people he did not know.

The coffeemaker had his throat slashed
long ago by unidentified assailants
and shows an aversion
to cherry-flavored cough drops.

Someone remembered the Brattle Theater
in Cambridge, Mass., and the sound
of Harvard laughter at those antic Marx Brothers
on the screen. Bygone days of thirty-five-cent
packs of smokes and rampant insecurity
and the lonely feel of the bar called
Casablanca down below. A man named
The Don was mentioned. He drove a Porsche
and shared a bottle of Yoo-Hoo
with his Great Dane, saying his mouth had been
on dirtier things. The narrator could only marvel
at his game plan while not quite knowing what it was.

For this and more we unanimously resolved to return.

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on dirtier things. The narrator could only marvel
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The Ordering Mind

I washed the floor
with warm water
and a drop of ammonia.
In the lamplight
the wood has come to life.
I then listened as Arlene spoke
about the joy of retirement,
her decision to live after
twenty-five years on the bottle,
and to the Albanian doorman Enver,
who fled a sentence of equal length
for speaking against the Stalinist state.

Blessings there are to recognize
in the enveloping stillness
provided for you.

October 2011

Do It Now or Do It Never*

After staring for a time at photos
of the old Penn Station we declared the past
to be of no value. Unknown as we are,
we anticipate no hue and cry over this announcement.
Our full energies we will focus on the now.
So we also declared. As we stepped out,
We noted a sign in the window of the restaurant
promising “all you can drink with dinner,”
an offer management may wish to
reconsider given the abundance of lusher
in the area. Ad yet that is not our concern,
as we haven’t imbibed in the longest time.
To avoid a return to those days of squalor
we spent an hour with a convicted felon
who made it her business defraud people
of their life savings before being bathed
in her redeemer’s light. Though she had no formal
education, she spoke as one who did,
lawyers assuming she belonged to their tribe.
We could hold nothing against her because of
her honesty and designer eyeglass frames.
We then went for pizza and struggled to stop
after one slice. Next was the big test.
Night having fallen, could we amble along
Broadway with couples strolling hand in hand
rendering those utterly alone on conspicuous display.
In fact a woman all dolled up and out with number one
was heard to shout “Get off our street,” but we
took the buffeting blow and maintained our course
to Best Buy, where we sought directions to the restroom.
Security finding no incendiary device in our bag,
we accomplished our mission and surfaced
to catch a pokey bus. By now a longing for home
dominated our being. We had it in mind
to watch a digitally remastered version
of *Dracula*, if we managed to get that right.
The thought then came of a street in Brooklyn
of unearthly beauty but its name eluded us,

summoning a return to our vanishing point
that the past has no value if we say it doesn't.

Straight Talk

Each time we think
the thing we plan to say
will be the right thing,
the people we say it to
move away, the words
exposed as weak or pompous
or recriminating in the light.
And so we wait for new words
to come in the night as always
it has been important that speaking
go on whether people hear or not
with the ears they have been given.

Over Here

True, we were alarmed by the prospect
of the darkness we might soon be entering
but also thought with increasing clarity
about the ephemera all around
and finally dared to say: what does it matter
if we leave without so much as a trace?

Our day got better. We exercised,
we told the truth to a stranger,
we steamed broccoli, kale, and a yam
while listening to the loud sound.
That was a mood changer,
the lead singer belting them out
as we danced in our kitchen.
Oh yes we did.

This thing of remembrance:
It is why we are here now,
checking in at this late hour.

2010

Listen

We did it again,
turned back to the past
while washing the dishes.
Rubber Soul, this time.
Unmoved by the sound
until the Fab Four sang "Girl."
That got us going,
imagining them on tours,
crowds going wild.
You have to be careful
with an album like that.
You start off picking apart
the lyrics, saying can't touch me now
with all that youthful angst,
and then they get you.
They just do.
You're back there somewhere
you can't be anymore
and so you can't be where you are.
And all the things we wanted to tell you
we can't tell you now,
Because they don't mean anything,
Not after *Rubber Soul* has done its work.

But we'll make a go of it anyway.
We sat in a coffee shop with a stranger
and suggested steps he could take
to save his life.
We walked in the rain.
We bought organic chocolate
and spoke high school French
to the doorman.
We posted wanted notices
for all the public nuisances
of the last twenty years.
We suffered a nose bleed
without drawing conclusions.
This last we'll continue with another time.

Speak No More

The men in the room talking.
Good talk, the kind
full of conviction.
Talk suggesting they had
something to say
and needed to say it then and there.

One of the men who had been talking,
after he stopped talking
he just sat there.
He was old, this one.
Where his words had gone
or what they had even meant
he couldn't say.
His talking was over, just over.

A stranger stood among them
witnessing the old man's fatigue,
his depletion,
wanting to tell him his silence
was the most moving thing
he had ever seen.

No, that stranger was not us
nor can we be tied to the excess
of emotion he conveyed.
He is on his own with that.
On his own, we say.
Do you hear us?
Do you?

Cul-de-Sac

Men making nice
With children not their own.
Beelzebub at the door again,
His breath so hot and foul.

2010

White Man's Burden

I bought a scarf today,
The first in all my sixty years.
I hadn't thought I needed one.
I mean, what was that to wrap your neck in wool?

A merchant from Africa sold it to me.
Every day he stands on the corner
With his wares; knock-off pocketbooks
And gloves and ear muffs
And yes, scarves in many colors.
We are talking late November now,
In New York City, when the
Weather turns serious.
I wondered where in Africa he
Was from and what he knew.
A lot, I suspected,
Living as he had over there,
Closer to nature than I have been.
Lions and tigers,
Carnivorous snakes with retractable jaws,
Baboons and chimps and capuchin monkeys,
All these and more varied matters
He could have spoken of at length.

I wrapped the scarf around my neck.
How warm it made me feel.
My image in store windows
suddenly pleasing to my eye
At panache the accessory brought.

Thinking about the African warmed me, too.
No, I can't say why.

When I reached in my pocket,
I discovered he had made
A mistake of one dollar and in my favor
In giving me my change.
His thick fingers had been too cold

To correctly count as he peeled
The bills off his wad.
And so I had my excuse
To present him with this excess.

Something has shifted.
We will see what all this means.
At the moment neither the African
Nor I have that information.
Some things perhaps it is beyond
Even the African to know.

2010

Out with It

This journey we take
In our dreams

Means
The past rediscovered
Never having gone away

Means
More than
One dimension

Means
Someone is telling us
Something

Means

You Were Saying

It's changing
Imperceptibly,
The shadow
Of indifference
Growing longer.

This morning I fell asleep
With my MacBook on my lap
And seemed to wake in stages,
Not knowing where I was.

Later there will be a birthday party.
I will have my gifts in hand,
Store-bought, store-wrapped,
Ready for delivery.

2010

Come On

I turned to the blue page of sorrow today. Blue is blue. This novel I am trying to write. Dead in the water, it seemed, though I did find a way to go on. And this evening I told my hair stylist that I feel like my life is behind me. Tamiko assured me that it is. The silences between us as I sit in the chair have become comfortable. Tamiko loves me and I love her, even if we cannot tell each other so. She is a perfectionist and still holds it against me that I once questioned the length she had cut my hair. Slight yet tough, she laughed when informing me that her husband had suffered an injury to his back. Maybe she has injuries of her own? She leaves New York to visit him in Montana once a year, where he spends his days fly fishing. For my part, I traveled to her hometown, Kyoto, some years ago. Obama had just won the election and seemed a figure of puzzlement to many Japanese. After leaving Tamiko, I headed down to the Fairway market with my new haircut. Thirty dollars worth of groceries I loaded into my backpack on wheels, plus a deodorant stick. Tom's of Maine is the product I support. No aluminum to seep into my bloodstream. I may be getting off track here. That can happen when I carry around in my pocket a letter from my ex-wife. It was in my mailbox as I was heading out. Look, it beats walking around with a Con Ed bill, if you get what I'm saying. Life is about connection, I heard old Keith Richards sing. Frankly, I didn't know he could, but he did a good enough job and now the song pops into my head at the strangest times. Like right now, tonight, here in my kitchen, as I look forward to calling it a day, all of me rallying around the idea of sleep.

2010

Say It Again

It is too much.
Going here, going there.
Seeing ugly buildings
On ugly streets,
Ugly people
In ugly clothes.
It is too much
To say the same thing
Over and over
Each day
To make the bed
To wash the dishes
To put out the garbage
To balance the checkbook
Too much, I say,
Too much.

I am home now.
The door is locked,
The few groceries put away.
These words, to write them
Somehow comforts me.
Sense. I am making
Sense of things,
I think,
Putting a name
To things, I think.
Trying to bring order,
To take that
Which has fallen
And place it
Back on the shelf.

You have heard
All this before,
But I am beyond
Begging
Your forgiveness.

For this I am truly sorry.
Believe me.

Hello

Say something true.

The toilet in the subway station
Is under lock and key.

A bus had my name on it
But missed me by a whisker.

For some time now I have felt
The shadow of death.

A beautiful woman claimed she was out of reach
But not in quite those words.

Men with painted faces were playing
Loud music and jumping around.

Men without women were seen
Wanting them.

People cold and hungry on the street
were uniformly ignored.

The word *desperado* is not heard much
Anymore.

The word *desperation* is everywhere.

2010

Leave Your Guns at Home

The mechanism for love proved faulty,
And now the company has welshed on the warranty.

What to do?

Mad Men brought us to tears.
All Bets wanted was to be a team with Don,
Thoughtfully reading that slim volume of O'Hara poems
Before mailing it off to his Greenwich Village girlfriend.
His ad man's brain penetrated, reshaped.
So touching, his rapt attention to the text.

Barnes and Noble a graveyard of dead books
Brightly packaged, and yet the poet's collected poems
Beckoned, burning with life,
And so we sought the inspiration
A brief acquaintance with his work might bring.
We were restless, there in the Broadway night.

The voice that is great within us?
We have heard that phrase before.
Speak into the void?
Give shape to the amorphous oblivion it is calling us toward?
Well, all we can say is the hour is late.
The time for sleep has mercifully come.

2010

Say Something

I wanted to come home.
I couldn't.
I wanted to get away.
I stayed.

Now we hear of Lazarus
Newly raised from the dead
And elders reminiscing about
Salt water taffy and Rockaway Beach
Circa 1961.

Come on, someone says,
Let's have a party.
Let's do it up right.

How long do we stand in a corner,
Our hands to our ears?

This is not an idle question.

The threshing machine is on the way.

2010

Attention, Please

How pleased I was to receive your e-mail, though *pleased* isn't the right word. Stimulated, I guess, but also pained to hear you had put down *The Counterlife* after only a few pages. Because you had bought the novel at my suggestion, I had no choice but to feel terribly responsible for your disappointment. I do not endorse your viewpoint that there is something "terribly wrong" with you for not taking a shine to contemporary fiction, which you find less than uplifting, and for seeking refuge in the works of Trollope and Dickens and Thackeray and other giants of the nineteenth century. The preference speaks loudly to your independence of mind and hints at your depth. If I cannot revisit that earlier time, see it as a limitation on my part, the shallowness of an American who feels as though he is being remanded to an old age home when he reacquaints himself with the classics. I suppose I am afraid of being rendered instantly obscure unless I occupy a front row seat, where those in the rear have no choice but to notice my presence, even if their eyes are mostly focused on the stage. In the morning, I may have told you, I read various spiritual texts and often ask myself what my life would be like if I devoted myself exclusively to such works instead of the novels and books of poetry and magazines I generally turn to. It's not as if I derive great pleasure from the secular reading that I do. Once again, it is that fear of falling behind, of fading into obscurity. It's something for me to work on. Meanwhile, I've completed most if not all of my Christmas shopping. It is a most beautiful time of the year. I can't say it any other way than that.

Over Here

This scattering of one's seed.
Where is that one vessel?

These words, thoughts, images—
Is it possible they obscure your face?

Imagine a voice that says most forms
Of activity are little more than cowardice.

Oh, can it already. Just *can* it.

Sihugo Green Zelmo Beatty
The full roster of the Syracuse Nationals, 1961.

In the long ago those basketball doubleheaders
at Madison Square Garden, the one on Fiftieth and Eighth.

Over and over saying the same thing instead
Of allowing the silence to *happen*.

Writing is the only relief for the invisible.
Writing is the only relief for the indivisible.

Jesus, it is midnight and the vitamin bottles haven't
Said a word, not one single word.

Jesus, it is Jesus.

Jesus, it is me.

Jesus, it is I.

Are You There?

Last night you took a break from fear
and danced alone to reggae
in your own apartment, letting go
of your concern about new tiling
for the kitchen floor and how
you might pay for it.

Altogether it was a good day.
You had dinner with Beloved,
and though she did rebuke you
in that voice she sometimes deploys,
the sting of her words soon receded.

The avalanche of time is having that effect,
burying your concern that an acquaintance
with a daunting resume will learn
you attended a lowly public college
or that advancing baldness threatens
to expose the oddness of your head.
Soon, you say, you will be walking naked down
Broadway with a sign declaring,
“No Secrets to Conceal.”

Enough, you also say.
You have dishes to wash, plants to water,
and tomorrow there are books
to return to the library,
where your record of not incurring fines
has been outstanding.
All we can say is keep up the good work.

Hear Me Now

Naked he stood on Broadway
addressing the breeze
on which blew past
mysteries that held no suspense
chronicles of ruined lives
words to the wise dead on delivery
predictions and idle threats.
A prayer he offered to the being
beyond words that he might come
out of hiding and manifest in the soiled air.

“Do you not have any friends?”
a shaming voice from his past
was heard to inquire.

Saying in reply,
“My voice is my friend.
Words I whisper as I walk
or lie down in darkness,
words spoken in code
to ensure my safety
should anyone hear—
that I remain free,
unimpeded on this earth,
my skin unscarred by
the thousand and one shards
resulting from argumentative pain.

For that day anyway,
his interrogator withdrew,
and if he came again
the answer would surely
have to be the same.

2010

Forever

Back then I served as a tutor
at a daycare center in Harlem
with a man who later blew his legs off
making bombs in his walkup apartment.
One afternoon a young black girl asked me
what a yawl was. When I paused, she said,
“Oh, you a dumbass just like me.”
Outside a man sat on the curb drinking
from a pint of wine. “Don’t be looking
out the window at my pops,” the girl said.
“I needs you looking at me.”

This was long ago, when I was in love
with a girl who lived in another city
and she with me and my life
had the appearance of being in front of me.

2010

To Whom It May Concern

Earlier today a man sought my help, explaining that he was a woman trapped in a man's body. Some aspect of yesteryear was in his face, but no matter. I told him I felt the same way and to call and we would talk.

This you should also know. The manager of the organic foods store where I buy my veggies and tofu? She locks herself and the staff in at night. They rearrange the content on the shelves until daylight. She's young and pretty and so I asked if she wouldn't rather be making love during those nocturnal hours, but she walks her own path, offering only a handshake well after the tenth date.

What's that you say? I have a lot of nerve speaking about others in this way and that you are recommending me for sensitivity training? To you I say, lay me down where you will, in the bulrushes or the forgotten byways of some lost world.

2010

We Saw You

A crime was committed right here in daylight,
the offense being a novel
he gave to her by Philip Roth.
“Salacious. Inappropriate. You must
understand—no one reads him
anymore, not women anyway.”
So she said under the broken sky.

He sought to console himself with the purchase
of a microwave, but the reviews were mixed,
and so, for fortification turned to reading up
on bursitis and encephalitis,

neither of which he had. He then bought vitamins
he didn't quite need and watched *Mad Men*
reruns, starting with the last and working backward.
He added new quotes to his Facebook page—
“Don't make me mad. I just might do something”
was his personal favorite. But his story had been stolen,

sold piecemeal in forty-seven states,
and the concept of self-expression had lost all meaning
now that adults had taken over the playground swings.
In response he shouted the phrase “no holds barred”
in subway stations and airport lounges, startling
the sophisticates brushing their teeth with CNN
and performing private morning ablutions.

2010

In Sleep We Remember

I woke happy.
In my dream we had made love,
continued our connection,
if only in the other world.
Then you e-mailed
in real time.
You needed something,
business-related.
I refrained from saying
how much I miss you
and how, despite the ludicrous
difference in age, I wish we could
be together. I understand my words
are plain, but right now I'm in need
Of getting it all down on paper,
however dismissive critics will be.
We have to save our own lives, Annie,
we have to say, at some point,
I don't give a rat's ass what you think,
and anyway, what you think could be
entirely different tomorrow. This is my life
to live, and the question is whether
in fact I have been living it.
Well, no matter.
Whether this love is on the shallow
plain of carnality and delusion,
the statement has been made.
I have met the press
and spoken my truth.
Do with it what you will,
the lot of you.
Just remember, this has been
a briefing with your president.

2010

Repeat After Me

My pain has called me away.
A self-satisfied sort
has banned my article.
Too personal, he says.

The wall
You've hit it, buddy.
How does it feel
bleeding on the ground?
Passersby saying
serves you right
next time
keep your opinion
to yourself.

Go ahead,
wander the city streets
talking to yourself
in code.
Do all your crazy shit.
You're alone
and no one no one no one cares

2011

Bottom Up

The road signs told him he had lost his way
on that particular day
and so with gratitude for the guidance
received he set the car on its proper path.

It was not like that with the drinking life.
There the road he traveled featured
alluring women holding signs aloft
that read "Pleasure pit straight ahead."
A cushioned ride it was free of potholes,
tie-ups, tollbooths,
the frustrations suffered
by those unfortunates
mired on their wretched road.

With the anesthetic of alcohol in hand,
pain held no value,
nor was the embrace of personal growth
anything more
than an affectation reserved
for the pompous and inane.

The die was cast so please
to shut it and just drink.

Well defended against the truth
by an illness reliant on the lie,
he had found his one true friend,
constant in its nature while all around
pledged fealty to their fickleness.

Exits off this road are seldom seen.
Death or derangement are often in between.
Best to take it should one appear.

Turning Out the Child

In the doorway of the store
a figure all in black,
eyes only for you
as you tore through the Batman comic.
Looking up enough
to leave you terror struck.

Only days before another,
sweat beading his fatherly face,
expressed his need of you
and the promise of reward,
the urgency in his request
stripping you of power to resist.

Into a nearby phone booth
were you led
and the folding door closed.
Soon, the confining space splattered
and the floor fouled, the stranger fled.

Sunday being family day,
with your mother in a pew you sat
as impassioned Pastor Horvath
spewed his disappearing words.
The spirit sparked within her,
she rose to speak—a slew
of syllables eluding sense—
God doing whatever it was God did,

freeing you to flee into the street
and speed breathless for that store.
The master's call you heeded,
your only prayer to overcome
your fear as by now he was
so desperately needed.

Lincoln

He fell in line with the structure of his face,
its irregular shape and power,
ebullience not a requirement
where amusement would do.
Legend of the fallen master,
screamed headlines drawing on the past
while banking on the future.
How no one dared to ask him for the time
on his big watch with his thoughts upon the ages
though as insurance from distraction
he went without it into the night.
Facts he summoned, cherry-picked,
and anchored their truth in his orating mind.
When holes in the earth were dug
for lowering of the coffin-bound
he soon lay down as well
that he might journey to worlds
beyond the one he had exhausted.

After Reading *The Prelude*

When I read to you about Appomattox and you don't listen
I am reminded of all my father failed to say, the boulders too great.
The important thing is that mourning has come to America again.
Poetry is springing the old lady free of the chains that would fetter
her industry and now the guns are blazing with a torturing joy
and we have not even reached the Fourth of July. Those chocolate
doughnuts on a Massachusetts night made me love life dearly
in the idyllic long ago. Bruce Springsteen circa 1985
has entered the picture and John Lennon before him
holding his baby boy. The time is not always right for civil war
or toxic fumes or even the distinctive sound of silence but the point
in between, that which sings its own sweet song with no ambition
to sprinkle the sun with tears. Mourning in America is at the center
of the dream, ruined landscapes capitulating to its shadowed glory,
and so we hold to that second scoop of ice cream with sprinkles added.
If I leave you, know that I am always here, that you are always dear
and the transmissions that follow are from the workings of my heart.
All impediments to sight and progress have been removed.
If there is awkwardness in my expression, it is only from
amazement at the beauty I lack words for.

Antietam, October 3, 1860

We saw what the bastard did,
impertinence in his face
and opposition in his stance
as he leaned in on the taller man.
We saw too his coterie of wolves
ready to pounce.

The whole history of the country
in that one photo
there in the time of our innocence,
brutal as it was.

Empire State

One morning, before my father
became my father, a bus
just missed him as he stepped into the street,
but he was used to close calls.
In his uprooted life there had been many.

A mannequin in the window of a store
and the low-cut dress she wore
brought him to a stop.
His dream had been realized, he said to her.
Here in America he was free to roam
the boulevards of the city

And if fast moving buses wanted him
to mind his step, he would oblige.
But with sundown sadness overcame him.
A friendly face seemed nowhere to be found.

As for the new building, he saw what
it was up to, challenging God
instead of asking God to enter it.
And that needle at the top, as if to blind
The heavens as to its real intention.

Someday the reckoning would surely come.
He didn't mean to sound threatening.
He was only saying he would keep an eye on it.
That was all he wanted the mannequin to know,
that he was watching and on full alert.

Diner

The bread was hard.
The kind to break your teeth.
So too was the waiter.
His inflexible face
set to a state of grievance.

The days mount.
So too the years.
And you are still there,
scraping crumbs from the table
when the diners are done.

A vision is not possible
in sheets of lashing rain,
extreme cold,
the numbness
that repetition brings.

There is a road you did not take
available now only in your dreams.

If I May Say

You had your reason for coming to me there on the street after the meeting, a side street where others were less likely to see your attempt at appropriation. And the darkness too you held to be in your favor. Please understand: you are but a vague mist in my personal history. I have not sat over breakfast with you nor was I a member of your wedding party. Evidently, you thought I had something worth taking and went for it, saying you missed Funelli, the great man, the man whose words you once savored like tasty morsels compatible with your vegan diet. So greedily you reached, as if you hadn't eaten in years. And yet the past may not hold the answer you expect. Turning to me for information retrieval purposes now that his words have faded from your consciousness is futile. Funelli is gone, gone. You have your own greatness to cultivate, meaning that voice that is great within you, as the poet said, which you will not discover while I am in your sights.

Release

He buttons the snaps of her long winter coat
and guides her down the icy steps.
Someone to hold onto is he
in the implacable night,
this criminal sprung from prison
to care for his elderly mother.
With age comes consolidation, he says,
in a feverish state, the wrapping of the world
in a sentence reefer thin
to provide the illusion of order.
Fragrances blister his skin and trigger
dreams of slender young women
adoration worthy in wool winter caps,
incendiary devices hidden in the cups
of their bras. He hears himself say
all life depends on sleight of hand
and the structural ruination of poetry,
the image appearing of Robert Lowell
in unmatched socks on the steps
of a church God knows where,
attrition ongoing as it only should be.

Follow

My father is not in my dreams.
He is not forbidden.
He simply does not enter,
my father being a man
who meant it when he said
he was on the runway taxiing for takeoff,
this if you must know at the hospital
where gangrene gripped his leg.
In those last years he grew
ever more silent, a problem for me
as his unworthy biographer.
From the decimation of Armenia
he emerged into his adult life
to witness trains arriving and departing
from the terminals of the world
while holding to the hope of resurrection,
having heard here in America and taken to heart
the song "I Will Follow Him,"
never once believing the lyrics had a thing
to do with earthly love.

Death

I went to the movies to see *Death*.
The film was sold out at one theater
and so I went to another where
Death was also playing.
Are you sure it's about death?
I asked before purchasing my ticket.
Oh yes came the reply.
And there it was.
Death was on the screen.
Death and tooth decay
and all manner of decrepitude.
I sat alone in the back
free of creatures to either side
until a man came with his box of popcorn
and chewed every mouthful in my ear,
smacking his lips loudly.
I had my own box of popcorn—
In truth I had come to the theater
as much to eat popcorn
as to be made grim and miserable
by death, but he deserved a public
humiliation, as no one should be
permitted to eat popcorn as he did.
Shut up, I said, taking his popcorn
and throwing it into the aisle
for the rats to feast upon,
for we were sitting in a ratty theater,
there could be no doubt.
Of course he then did the same with
my box, throwing it as well into
the aisle for the now abundant rats.
But there is no of course, is there?
There is no inevitability in the matter
of popcorn, at least not the inevitability
that death brings to the table.

On Turning Seventy-Two

A-weemah-wey you said upon awakening,
as if to block out the reality of consciousness,
only later connecting it with that song of yesteryear
about the jungle, the mighty jungle,
not knowing back then it would linger in your head.
You considered the futility of most songs
you had ever heard
to impact the moment you were now in
and remembered further the arbiter of truth
saying in another century it was common
to *make* music, as if passive listening
were now the degenerate norm.

How desperate you were for that Hitchcock movie
last night, almost depriving yourself of sleep
though you had seen it several times before.
And after? The thought that came of purchasing
a camera, of photographs you might take,
some record to leave behind that you had been here at all.

Plagiocephaly, or Sir Flathead Speaks

Soon will you be summoned
to bear witness to my balding head,
cordially invited to its
coming out party.
I myself will not be there,
having taken it on the lam,
my options being none
given its unsightly shape.
So my vanished locks will fully attest.
But, you will say, in the full throes
of your inflated logic,
where does one go without a head?
Leaving me to reply,
kind sirs, where have you gone
with yours but to aimlessly wander
the desecrated fields of yesteryear
discerning doves routinely pass over.

Pathway

He says he was not meant
for the sun or moon or stars
but the pedestrian pathways of life.
With evening approaching
he drifts toward the park
and its familiars—
the marina and the the pier
and the helmeted cyclists
imperious in their insistence
on their right of way
even as lovers are mellowed
by the pacifying river.
In transit will the throb
of the locomotive arouse
the promise that motion can bring
of faraway places and high above
the effortless glide of the jet plane,
his eyes helplessly lifted
to its flight path through the clouds.

Morning

You need a respite from the rain,
you said, stepping into the shower,
words outpacing meaning
as they often do,
the face of your ex emerging,
a clarifying image in the steamy stall.
Sorry, you say. Will do better,
will ease up on my doomsday song
as you scrub yourself clean for the new day.

Girl

Back then I had no guidance for my life.
A girl stood at my side, her green parka
not the only emblem of her distinction.
with my Rolleiflex I sought her immortality
but no forgiveness for my wandering ways,
guilt the premises I stood on.
She is gone in the mist yet even now
summons a yearning for those sun-splashed days,
hers the language of turbulence
injected into her paints, Van Morrison
filling her space with *Moondance*.
Speak, man, there in your dark, while you still can.
Tell how, even in the depths of her winter
she remained in tune with her one true love.

Getting Current

The rock tree people came
bearing their rock tree fruit
and showed no went
but spoke their name enduring.

The nerve to put on airs
and secure themselves
with loony logic applying
to what you said or didn't
while saying you did.

Fog your mind they would,
some opposed standing
in the demonstration circle
of their love with speech short-lived,
the rock tree people serving up
their specialty rock tree fruit demise,
casting an unfriendly shadow
on the earth, a specter in the sky.

More and more, day by day
their personal constitution writing,
the slippery of their nature showing.

The Visit

Your love, it has reached me.
No need to embellish
with deep dives
or towering ascents.
It came gently
as I knew it would,
like the bluejay alighting
on my windowsill
this early spring morning.
Its bright plumage serving
as your emblem comes
as no surprise,
gaiety following after you
as I do in these days of my life.

All Aboard

He said his name was Chili Con Carne
and did I want to make something of it.
Said I might want to know his birth name
was Danger, this not far from home.

I want the past to be an engine
uncoupled, the freight cars left
to lighten the load so it can move
more freely down the line.

Faulkner saying the past not even
the past or something like that.
People say all kinds of things,
as you may have noticed.

It's four in the morning and I'm sitting
in my favorite chair. Soon enough
I will head back to sleep and dreams
that take me where I would not think to go.

About Walking

Krishnamurti was a man who walked alone.
Not always but a lot, I read somewhere.
I too walk alone a lot, not that I'm anything
like Special K. Something else he said,
about ethnicity being insufferable and how
it leads to torches in the night and one village
burning down another. I don't have the book
at hand or even know the title, but no matter,
I wouldn't go back there anyway. Something
terrible happened in that time, even if it was
only my life. It would be like putting on
an old pair of glasses. The associations
it brought would not be good. That's why
I like walking so much, or one of them.
You're always on the move when the past
comes calling. That way it can visit but
it just can't stay and threaten the love
that lives on even the cloudiest of days.

Time Together

The day Ned told me about Obama
was the day we visited the Rubin Museum
on an attractive Chelsea street.

I told Ned I felt like Gloria Swanson
making a grand entrance
as we descended the spiral staircase.

Concerning her career as an actress
I do not have a clear picture
or whether she was even seen
on the silver screen in such a setting
though I suspect she was,
being a woman of elegance and all that.

But if I am to be truthful, those Swanson
TV dinners come to mind as well,
meals in tin trays you pulled from a box
and heated. And swan song too,
which may have a place here
since both Ned and I have reached
septuagenarian status.

That's a word for you.

Like a river with difficult currents
you could drown in.

Afterward we went to our usual place,

macrobiotic, but the vibe was bad, really bad.

The host took her time before seating us

and the waiter tossed us menus

and picked his nose while staring into space.

Ned said it felt like a hangout for Asian mobsters,

and so we split to a place down the block

with hummus wraps on the menu.

Ned often says things in a way that make you remember

so I should finally tell you what he said about our president

so you can have it in your mind should it fit in yours

as it did it mine. He said Obama is unable to schmooze

with members of Congress because he essentially grew up fatherless.

The concept of a father is not even in his bandwidth.

So Ned asserted.

I do apologize for taking this long,

It's just that some journeys have a meandering way about them.

On this I hope and pray we all may agree.

The Dinner Hour

I was quite all right till I saw the rat
there along the base of the wall.
A feeling of dread its sighting summoned,
And all the more that it should be in a daylight hour.
And yet it came as no relief to witness
brazen Mr. Rat hanging in the talons of a hawk,
the vermin airlifted to a tree limb aerie,
or the crowd that gathered, cameras
recording for posterity the predator
tearing into his evening meal,
this in the city I have long called home
and whose streets I have learned
to walk in wariness of all that is around
and below and in the heavens above me.

You There

He left even as he was arriving.

That happens when someone

knows your sedentary way

and stays abreast of foreign exchanges

as you speak,

flies to far off destinations

while you live within

the confines of your city street.

A nervous tic the register

of miracles he has built on desert sands.

Your world the current *New Yorker*

The movie you saw on Sunday night,

the dreams you rest on

lulling you back to sleep.

The Encounter

Leaving her a grudge came to grow
that she should question me so closely
about the cane I relied on for support,
her smile conveying all too clearly
the schadenfreude she did not think
or know to hide, and so a smidgen
of malevolence now marred the day.
Her face a dark presence in my mind,
I arrived among the tall trees
Naked in winter, their frail limbs
Raised and importuning.
My prompt received, in ambulant prayer
I asked for love to fill her heart and mine,
My breath soon to be my only company.

Christmas

Drawn by the light,
I stayed close,
the darker streets
having lost their appeal.
Saw a mother walking
hand in hand
with her young daughter
and grew weepy.
Saw a father and his son
inspecting Christmas trees
and paused to stare.
Saw holiday shoppers
with big and bulging bags
and stepped out of their way.

Flight Path

In my dream I came running
but you were already out the door
with only your scent to lead me forward.
How long before forest creatures
ate me alive or the elements
arranged for my disposal?
You were fancy free in your flight,
dressed in the finest silk and wearing
your primo glass slippers.
Is there anything to do but bow down
to your front-runner status,
anything but acknowledge
you the clear-cut winner
in this meaningless race to nowhere?

Watch It

In the cold I fell asleep
and woke with limbs intact.
Murder came in fitful spurts,
its periods of constancy grown rare.
Even so, we watch our step.
Sinkholes have been opening up,
cavities in their loneliness
calling for companionship.

Settle down.
Find your ground.
Someone called.
Someone didn't.
Love entered, having
bashed in the front door.

You had a cup of soup.
I ordered a taco and swiped
your salted crackers.
On the street unstable elements
in dangerous digressions
from the norm.
On and on the mind went
on its journey of fear.

That Day Again

Caring is lost to me,
buried somewhere
in the deepest sea.

Please redirect yourself
to those in Human Resources
or with human resources
or whatever they are calling it
these days, the time having come
for a timeout from love.

So my wounded heart decrees,
I say in full earnestness, funny
valentine of mine.

Pandemic (1)

Today you see him
for the first time in a year,
the miracle of in-person connection.
As you sit on opposite ends
of the park bench, he performs
his encyclopedic knowledge
and receives from you once again
the acknowledgment he is due.
You must be Nanook of the North
but I will die of hypothermia
if I don't walk about, you say,
your friend confirming that yes,
hypothermia can overcome one
in less than freezing weather.
And though the affectedness flag
goes up at the numerical pronoun
you lower it immediately
in recognition that a wall,
of necessity, has to come down.

Blood Tie

I came armed with my own understanding
and learned anew that growth begins with pain.
No matter that you bounced me up and down
and off the wall or seemingly aspire
to place me in the vegetative state.
After all, you are governed
by your own impulses. So far as I know,
you put in no special request for them
at birth. That said, I'll make my way
on the shoulder of the road,
a modicum of distance maintaining
from your speeding little car.

Pandemic

In that moment came more deeply
the understanding what it means to say
the end of the line has been reached,
on the boulevard there standing
a house that once had known
pure whiteness, its faded paint
the visual proof that change had come,
no matter the buildings and bodies still surviving.
He was alone, as he had been for some time,
only now he felt old and alone,
a man struggling along with a cane,
those around so very far away.

Can I help You?

“Can I help you?” she asked
as I stood with my bag,
there at the lobby’s entrance,
but dashed on inside
when the doorman arrived.
So lifted my heart was
by her gentle voice and beauty
and the prospect of intimacy
the two of us might briefly share
in the elevator ride upstairs,
the anticipation of moments
to savor deep into the night
aborted, the door sliding
closed before me.

Manchild

He is not new to me,
the manchild reaching out
in the night, in the day,
driven by waves of worry and doubt.
The father who loved him too much
to let him live, lodging a bullet
in his brain back when.

Is it OK for him to wear a hat?
How does a circle of protection
eight feet around sound to me?
It's perfect, Donnie. Perfect.
Do you hear me? I say,
for the moment at least
in the embrace of love.

Evening Song

I have no need of innocence
he says to the four walls
while sitting in his upholstered
chair, then reaches for a pen
to commit these words to paper.
Evening has come.
Another uneventful day.
Is this spontaneous utterance
a visitation to build upon?
Many, many, have been
the false starts.
Wondering if this time
such a beginning
can have a genuine ending.

Return

I'm tired of your greatness.

Is there not some way
to claim my own? he asks
out loud, detaching from
the radio infusion
that would keep him
in her thrall.

The day's dishes
in the kitchen sink
call to him.

A pathway home,
he can only think,
rolling up his sleeves
and turning on the tap.

Approaching

After leaving her
I walked unsteadily,
shadowed by the specter of love.
Reality intervened. I stopped to pee
at the foot of a tall oak,
fouling its gnarly roots,
then moved on,
blessing the vagabond
with the bulging bag,
a bench the bed
on which he lay.
A hymn struggled in the cold air.
We gather together.
No match for the oncoming darkness.

Car

The car had its intention,
as cars so often do.

Move beyond its whiteness
to the smoked windows
and the purring engine
masking its acceleration
as the woman, hobbled,
slowly makes her way
across the street.

The broken bones,
the smashed skull,
but an instance of its violence
as it hits the highway
to strut its bloody, dented stuff.

Young Love

But what did it mean,
“I’m going to be around
for a long time”
he was driven to ask.
That she couldn’t say.
Two years? Three years?
She replied when pressed,
the word “forever”
not passing her lips.
Time showed no movement
when she was gone
and her presence brought no relief.
This in his summer of young love,
having turned seventeen.

Moviegoer

The lines of communication
were closed for the day.
The sea as well had entered silent mode.
Some cowboy fool drove a tank
onto the playing field
but it was love in vain, leaving
the cheerleaders unimpressed.
Antics get punished *before* you reach
the border, a pistolero promised.

Mother, once you carried me
in the middle of the night
from our burning building.
This was before I saw
Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me.

Chatter

Breathe
you say
birthing
awakening
the sound
of sound
today tomorrow
all days to come
beauty undressed
hiding in plain sight
poetry unending
chasing a truth
that eludes
the porous net
not vanquished
misunderstood
you say
the dust bunnies
of childhood
you were scolded
for neglecting
I am ready
for dinner now
you then say
as if there is anyone
to prepare it
I never asked for mercy
I never asked for love
not even for the dime
at the bottom
of your deepest pocket
I would ask for water
from a well
but they have all
dried up
don't distort
stick to the point
any will do
here you stand
aghast and last
so you say

Visitor

In the next town down
a flag grown fat
on its own pride
flapped in the strong wind.
I am seeking refuge
from the storm,
he said in defense of his presence.
The earth moves under my feet,
the sky makes treacherous advances,
wooing of the unsavory sort
comes from the trunks of trees.
My body betrays me.
My mind is bent on enslavement.
Kindly open your door.

Neighbor

He came, my neighbor, to my door
with the films of America
for my viewing pleasure,
scenes from prairie dust to lunar landings.
Watching brings us connection
to the bigger world, he said,
seeking to take me from my apartness,
and surely would be good
for my American blood.
Floating he was above me
with a can-do tattoo on his forearm.
Let's leave it there,
where he was, where I was
on different sides of the wall.

Taxiing for Takeoff

This parka that I wear summons
sudden delight that I should have it still,
in violation of my rule
that one coming in must be
balanced by one going out.
I have another, newer and brighter,
luminous even in the dark,
you might be led to think.
Have I applied the brakes,
moved back my departure date,
no longer inclined to see each stoplight
burning red as possibly my last?

Hear Me

Saying he don't carry no weight on him
The fire in him to speak that way
going all ungrammatical so his sound
could have more sound on it
all up in the air she was
him too in that trial balloon
so big they couldn't see it
all the time feeling what he said
was the stuff of laughter in her mind.
Well he would find out one day
but before and until he would
continue with his words
whatever they might be saying
beyond him anymore to say

Seventeen

When my friend Byron said to me,
“I so admire your board scores,”
stabbing me with the knife of irony,
I could only stand there dying.
He was to Harvard bound.
I had been to City College guided
by our high school counselor.

I did not know the trouble he was in
that he would call and call.
I could not see him then.
His success a reproach to my existence,
with savage glee I sent a note asking only
that he drop his pursuit lest I be forced
to finish the job that he had started.

Alone

No one came to find me.
I didn't expect them to.
For sustenance I picked dried fruit
from the tree of hopelessness.
A train whistled in the distance.
A cow mooed in my head.
Stars gathered overhead
and did their taunting little dance.
Dullness was reserved
for the endless daylight hours.
I began to look for cover
but the landscape had grown bare.
I had only my own skin to hide in.
This is what happens when you leave me.

Alive Again

I met you at the five and ten cent store.
I met you where my life no longer lives.

Flowers bloom in winter cold.
Strawberries grown big as gourds.

Mountains have turned mobile
while the seas are now in hiding.

And you there, heartless heartless wind,
loitering in the neutral zone.

All that is seen
begs to be forgotten.

This can happen when you read a poem
first thing in the morning.

Nabbed

So now you learn
once again
you are not special
here in the familiar
ruins of your dream
you walk and walk
seeking distance
from this woman
who has you
for the night
and expels you
during daylight hours
the pain yours
to do with as you will

Father Again

I need to die to all
that has gone before
I heard myself say
upon awakening,
driven by morning
abashment, the flashbacks
that would torment.
I am not innocent
of the life I have led.

Father, I then called out.
This too I should add,
his absence duly noted.

The Dark

When day was done she would come
and say the “now I lay me down” prayer.

I could never join in.

It was the “if he should come
Before I wake” part. “You know that
We are living in the last days,”
she would add, prompting a scream
of protest that she had had her life
and maybe now I could have mine.

There was a window in that room.

In summer heat and winter cold
and seasons in between, I shut it
tight lest Jesus or others get
a notion in the night.

Coltrane

Coltrane made me cry.
Why I cannot say, that
a lazy alto sax should bind
me to its wistful drift.
In memoriam for sisters gone
too soon? A brother too?
Those bluesy notes
no harbinger of spring,
sinking you down
to your buried treasure,
the long overdue
groan of grief.

Sibling Stuff

The stars had her in their hold.
Luster beyond my comprehending
she had found there in the heavens.
No more selling herself
down on Second Avenue.
I headed north and into trouble.
Nothing too alarming.
Halfway up the Hudson
three coach cars, red they were,
sat idle in the station.
Christmas had come early
that I should have them to myself.
Out on the water stood my father
mulling over the assignment he'd been given.

Hopper

The house had no need for understanding.
It had a purpose all its own
and a mind to keep it to itself.
Wasn't into your business.
No need to be in its.

The railroad had some business of its own
and stood within its rights to run straight past
the house and the blueness it was showing,
curtains drawn against the light
in the night and daytime too.
Had no need for snoops at any hour.

To the limits of the line a stranger
rode those rails and then returned for more,
his fill of the house not close to reaching.

Gun

The man had a gun, a gun, I tell you.
Waved it while ambling along.
We thought we'd leave him behind
but there he was, stuck to
our rearview mirror.
We faulted the road,
that stupid, rutted road
and booked a room at a decrepit hotel
down by the tracks.
The rollicking freights no protection
from the gungel's slow approach.
The flimsy door a big help,
crying out for mercy
like the weakling that it was.

The Light That Leads

In that surprise time of summer,
Sarah Lawrence bound Bonnie
blitzed him with farewell.

Trying to keep pace, Luke enrolled
in a local college but his study habits
were poor. He put the books to his face
as he saw others do, yet was unable
to catch the words before they disappeared.

Luke's soul aquiver from dismissal,
it was given to him to wander
backwater trails following the light
that leads to a place far but near
promising insight as to where
his ache of loneliness truly lived.

Vagabond Times

Impediments to justice being everywhere,
though hard pressed or unwilling to name them,
he set out on a journey with astral visions,
rejecting his earthbound status
and the time he had left to exist here,
a whole new vista promising to open
as the jet he clung to taxied on the runway
indifferent to his inevitable demise,
terra firma in its entirety
turned away if ever it should
have deigned to care, sour grapes
now part of his personal equation,
his only concession where or when
it would end was not for him to say.

Is

Morning in America is not what you think.

There is stasis among the young,

their hormones in hiding,

while an unbecoming randiness has been

trending in the elderly.

The weather prides itself on caprice

and brooks no interference.

Plants grow where they

had never before been seen,

deserts claim dominion over our seas,

zebras roam our rutted streets.

The strutting duck you see before you

is now mayor of our town.

Posture Plenty is his name.

Sought

I sought a bridge over
waters that ran free,
remembering the islands
of Stockholm and the ceaseless
cold of the sea.
Everywhere people playing
their cool jazz
and bars of chocolate
yours for the taking.
All of this plain as day
And the ache when it was not.

That bridge.
I could not find it.
In its place a mural
of Gethsemane
in afternoon stillness
as it only should be seen.

These images.
This slide show
I spend my day in.
Someone behind the veil
calling out next.

Garden of Delights

Max shone a light on the vinaigrette garden
while noting the oddity of its name.
The ocean was within walking distance,
bulls making it their business to patrol.
Even the palm trees were intimidated
while trying not to show it.
The order of the earth has deceased itself,
one whispered. The world is lost to the thrill
of all but the meaningless, said another.
I for my part had sworn to love you
in your aboriginal wildness,
your tattered tunic, your feet boiled clean
in one cauldron after another.
Now you reward me with the burden
of your recalcitrance. Even the tense
you speak in lies twisted like melted metal.
Be gone with your strange alphabet
and the peculiarity it spawns
knowing that your words have been
left in the rain where you so clearly belong.

Talk to Me

As a beginning
what else is there to do?
Empty spaces need filling.
Empty voices need substance.
Our time had come to talk
in the halting sentences
we could summon.
No need to despair.
Our words spoke
of isolation
yet were willing
if clumsy partners in the dance,
in obedience to necessity.

Spellbound

I said to Chaim it was like softball as a kid,
a big fat pitch lobbed to the plate
and one whiff after another.

Here I am now dying of regret,
I said to Chaim.

Dying.

All through the night
talking to myself
trying to block out the pain.

The pain, I said to Chaim.
The pain.

That woman with the lunar glow
in front of me on the grocery line.
How I should have told her
she was a heartbreaker for sure
and what I wouldn't give
to spend a star-filled night
in flight with her and maybe
still could, Chaim as ever
maintaining his silence
as sounding board for a fool.

Gone

Having seen you
as ordinary,
she has moved on
to one stronger,
more intelligent.

She was never yours
in other than your fantasy
that all-out effort to please
would win her.

The road ahead calls to you
but you must walk to the side of it
lest you be struck
by fast-moving traffic.

Neighbor

The stranger knocked on his neighbor's door.
This in New York City,
where tenants often keep to themselves,
The instruction inherent in the word
apartment itself.

The neighbor was old and frail and bent.
His furniture too was old
and pushed against the walls,
all sense of design
having left or never arrived.
And his life, that seemed old and left behind,
a space having opened up where only
memory survived.
That painting. Whose is it? the stranger asked.
My ex, the neighbor said.
and told the stranger more than he needed to hear,
of coming to the apartment thirty years before,
when crack vials littered the stairwells
and things were not right in the minds of the many,
including his own, having been asked by his ex to leave.
Hearts can break open or break closed,
the neighbor said, drawing on someone else's wisdom.
We can drip vinegar or kiss
with honeyed breath. Are you listening? Are you?
I and the ex are on good terms now,
the neighbor continued.
The best of terms. Love has not been lost,
only the marriage. Forgiveness is the key.
It's the hidden link that binds yet frees.
In fact the flame of life is burning
strong in me right now.
Love sickness is the torture that I live with,
reaching for her who is out of reach.
Not my ex but another.
On my knees I pray for the lifting
of this sickness. On my knees.
When walking about as well, you can be sure.
God is a refuge we must call on
for all manner of illness.

The stranger had issues of his own.
He had not come calling
seeking idle conversation
and yet was wrapped too tight to talk.
No textbook analysis followed
but the neighbor knew.
He knew,
and knelt at the altar of his own understanding
when some days later the stranger passed
and snubbed him on the street.
The neighbor felt no cause
to fall down dying.
The stranger had seen what he saw
and heard what he heard
and would sooner or later
in this life or the next
come back for more,
this certainty only reinforced
by the poinsettia
left at the neighbor's door.
Within the walls of his apartment
did the neighbor set it down
and confessed no surprise
when in the darkness it glowed
a surpassing red
that the neighbor might have
a visual depiction of the longings
of the heart, unbounded by the years.

Johnny

So what if Johnny can't read
Johnny Tremaine
Johnny Appleseed
Johnny mind your own goddamn business

if your mother can't sing
and yours and yours and yours

if apple trees and lilac bushes
seek to engage

in forbidden pastures
and vacant city lots

if smoldering sex is burning
through the decorum of her dress

and all politeness has booked passage
on a slow boat to China?

Call

I came to you imperfect in my love.
The stars over Broadway had made other plans.
Later I would call to the trains
for relief from obligation,
the bottle even more.
This is not a confession
but a reckoning of the life that wasn't.
Certificates of ownership were never your thing
as an agile dancer in the dark alleyways of pain.
I pursued you where you had been,
not where you were.
This ceaseless longing
for the thing I did not have.
I dream of you often.
A statement simple and true.

Awake

You're right, as often you are,
in the dream analysis you offered.
He was uncaring in his care.
So you succinctly said.
"That's dark," was my pained response.
A silence followed, uncomfortable at best.
A silence filled with tension.
Love or hate in the balance.
But these are not the old days.
There is a new freedom.
It is there, in that vulnerable pause.
The moon was looking down.
A full moon it was,
with blemishes on its soft and luminous skin.
Its eye was on me.
Softly it spoke a deeper truth,
that of your own uncaring care.

Love, Young

An island
immemorial

The lure of summer sun
ocean breezes

Startling, the newness
of young love

Where all have been
once upon a time

The Visit

I wondered
would they take me in
if I got really sick
and stash me somewhere
in their house
where I could just lie down
and cause no trouble
unlike in days gone by,
so I didn't have to go where
Marie had gone,
among the gray hairs
herded with their walkers
into the dining area
of the rest home,
too zonked to eat
their franks and beans.
Slipped away into the street
in search of the young,
that I might worship at their feet.

Story

Then I fell down.

Then I got back up.

The narrative to be continued.

Can you wait?

Sofa

It came from Sears.

Clunky.

The cushions hard.

No give at all.

Like the seats in her Volvo
that day we stopped off
for some Italian on Route 9.

My idea.

She had no appetite
for food or me.

Those Banana Republic pants

I would wear.

A size too big,
she noted.

Some men look better
in clothes than without.

This too from her.

Every new year a resolution
to replace it, the sofa.

Every year the money funding
trips to faraway places.

The sofa now my distant place.

In all seasons will you find me there
at one end or the other.

You There

The illicit architecture of your mind
is what you fear exposure of the most,
police stopping you on every corner
to examine your threadbare alibis
and that dwarf whispering
of better days ahead
if only you would journey to his realm,
not where you want to be
on a rainy summer night
or inclement weather in any season
even with the promise of new methodologies
for tracking crimes of the heart.

Goodbye

She knows from practice
how to say goodbye
to leave you with those others
she has left behind.

You stand apart,
your eyes set upon the road
you walked with her
in the hope that she will happen by.

You are stubborn in your longing.
In strong winds blowing and
under a sun that burns you wait
until you lift your eyes
and see the meaning
of your life in the scudding.

Will It Never Stop?

Then we say
something
not as we said it before,
this thing that needs saying,
in the saying
hearing it said
as if for the very first time

Sun in September

I thought, it being early
and the September sun weakening
and yet still bright,
that I would start with a walk in the park,
my horizons unending.
Coney Island called to me,
the whiff of hot dogs
carried on the salt air.
Thought I would live as I did
in childhood, the day so very long.
But my legs are now tired
and the sofa calls
as does the warm cup of tea
and the bed where I would
lie if only for a while.
In dreams there is a journey, too.

Gunman

The gunman was intent on his arrival.
They always are.
And yet you went about
heedless of our warnings,
as if safety was your birthright.
Always you have been cavalier
about your well-being,
talking loud on danger street
in earshot of those with minds to hurt.
Our eyes remained peeled,
having read what you dismissed,
a note in the night all the more sinister
for the child's hand it was w in.

Mangle

Some poet
I am bad with names
said we mangle experience
when we try to capture it
in a poem.

Something like that.

At the Whitney biennial
A bonanza of color and form.

From one floor to another
did I wander
never pausing
never entranced

until

I came to a window
with a view down
of the volleyball game
in progress.

Transfixed I was
by all the beauty
when come upon from above.

Mangle on, David.
Mangle on.

Morning

His attitude being one of displeasure
caused wild sparks in his morning omelette.

Came the manufacture of rage
on the subway ride downtown,

No one singing *in excelsis deo* when the hulking
homeless man blew.

A new appreciation of the light on surfacing,
legs called once more into action.

Stones are not gray in moonlight.
So a tall building called out, introducing uncertainty.

The auditorium acoustics meant
the loud sound throughout.

On the stage stood a man in the evening of his life
holding a microphone and firing off responses

to an audience bent on defiance of the norm.
The smell of popcorn everywhere.

Her

After leaving her
I headed for the sun
seeking to close the distance
before it disappeared
beyond the river always there
as a cold forbidding barrier
daring me to cross it.
Needing the sun to touch me,
to be a part of me, the way
I needed her.

Right

I turned to page one and began to read
but was soon led back to the beginning

in my growing need to get it right
from the start, not as it had been

through all the days of my life,
this though the hour had grown late

and the harsh voice in the night
was now calling for lights out.

Woke

You live with people's thoughts
long enough
you get sick of the whole business,
the business of thinking.
No profit in it most of the time.
Let them think what you think
they're thinking and go, just go.
Nobody's waiting for you,
needing to hear from you,
any of that. And don't be buying
no more shirts.
Nobody's looking at you either.
Free and unclaimed—so you are
should you dare to know it.

His Sweetness

The beast said he loved me
and would I be his lion tamer
after beating Rico senseless
on a baseball diamond
by the river.

On that very playing field
his declaration made
with no need to reference
the savagery to come.

The tendency to dance in flames
in my nature.

Here he lies now,
the sweet dear,
snoozing in my chamber.

Stalked

The man had a gun
as he walked along
the side of the road.
Methodical. No great rush.
We were in a car
expecting to leave him behind
but there he stayed
in our rearview mirror.
It was the dirt road, we said,
The stupid rutted road.

We came to a town.
A flimsy hotel.
That's right.
Flimsy.
No protection from the slow
steady gunman there.
No protection anywhere,
even the walls dissolving
after calling out our name.

Turning Ten

There would no turning back.
It was happening too fast
the day the small wonder—so my
mother called her—was brought home.
There she was on the bed
that served as a sofa,
on her back in a big diaper.
My older sister, her mother, was there.
She a drunk and her husband
an even bigger drunk
and both of them mean.
There were others like that
in the family,
older and drunk and mean,
Giving you all kinds of reasons
for wanting to stay right where you were.

Broken

Lizzie, beautiful Lizzie, shared with me
about the last days of some poet in the fullness

of his brokenness, a man living only to die.
This she learned watching a movie

at the new and glitzy theater
with recliner seating down by the river

while crunching the ice cubes in her iced tea.
Crunching ice cubes could catch up with her

and maybe lead to a hefty dental bill, I said,
the thing about brokenness if you had to be broken

was not to be more broken than you already were.

Night

Swallow me

whole and complete.

Grant me the black hole darkness

I am seeking.

I have no quarrel with the wounding ones,

None that I would care to express.

I have found my way to forgiveness.

It is only this—

at times I just don't care to be here.

But Listen!

I'm tired of your problems, you say.
One mistake after another.
A hash you make of this, of that.
But listen! You run about this earth
In soiled garments while living on
salt water taffy and Slim Jim magic.
Look, the journey is a long one
and we just keep pitching.
Fire your own ass if need be,
but don't be assaulting my ears
with your Chicken Little
bullshit. Just leave the sky
where it is and do your bitching
where only the wind can hear you.

Ned

Ned, you say you have no hands to speak with
and no mouth to hold onto.

Though your normal lucidity is missing,
We have all been called where we do not belong,
fodder for the beast, pockets turned inside out,
leaving us to wonder at the lunacy
of thinking we could ever be fancy free.

Look. There are always the windows
of Tiffany's to stare into as a starting
point for regaining lost luster.

Why not go there now

And begin your day all over?

Remind yourself that the call of the wild
is only the call of your reckless country.

Hanh Time

A forest forager he had become,
the rain his sometime companion.
Just being itself it was with the smell
that lingered after a downpour.
The elements had learned his name
and called to him,
as did the wildlife,
some taunting, some kind.
The fallen leaves he fell upon.
How little comfort they provided.
But Thich Nhat Hanh was there,
showing him the way
with his focus on the breath
far from supermarket reality.

Home

In leaving the comfort and warmth
your house provided I also left you lonely,
your tongue so active in its aspiration
to encompass and ensnare
with the volume of words you spoke,
nothing escaping your aggressive attention,
including the love you lacked and the kind
I could not give.

Here I now stand under the watchful moon
awaiting the light of the train in the dark
I am counting on to speed me back home.

Mean It

The day was one for love sickness
even with the sun shining down.

He came upon a concert of and for the elderly,
the gray hairs and no hairs with instruments
gathered in the garden of fallen leaves,
rats foraging in the faded grass.

Briefly the trembling violins held him
before he moved on, stunned and deprived,
praying that he be bleached of all longing
and return to the holiness of the now
even if he didn't quite mean it.

Profile

To be dead weight
as even the dead would attest

To shout in the midst of every
conversation *Yankee baseball*

The nerve
the gall

To do it his way
with no explanation

as to what it is.
Homunculus.

There he goes again
throwing garbage

from the overpass
onto major arteries

while screaming
he is the deer
in the headlights.

Provisioned

Fairy tales read on bubble gum tapestries.

Sticks of gum the staple of my day.

At five minute intervals were they slipped
under the door.

Juicy Fruit.

Doublemint.

Doubled pleasure. Doubled fun.

Pillows of wadded gum to lay my head on.

Wrappers to protect me from the cold.

I was provisioned for

is what I wish to tell you.

Even In

The sun occluded.
Dark even in daytime.
A creature
spewing fantasies
on a rotating stage.

The night pitiless.
You reach where you know
not to go
and turn back in prayer
for the light.

In bed you lie waiting
for sleep and dreams
filled with strangers.
The absence of the familiar
not a problem.
Home is anywhere but here.

On the Road

Did you miss me?

In the rain?

In the cold?

Amid the harbingers

of death all around?

This I have no need to ask

in dreams

where you are with another

and I die and die until

dawn comes to rescue

Hurting

I will not lie to you.

I was agitated.

My back. It was hurting again.

Severe punishment resulting
from what the universe would not permit
to be a small mistake.

To the ends of the earth I went with my pain.

I spoke out in the halls of justice.

I searched through ancient ruins for answers
and stayed in touch with men in space.

I showed myself a colossal failure
in public places and succeeded.

I wrote “laughingstock” as two words
and defended my decision.

I said everything but I love you in my hour of need.

Family Familiar

And so you set aside the photos,
having seen them many times before.
From another century your father calls
and from the branches of dead trees
hang the corpses of your siblings
ever needful of attention.
Where then to put your eyes?
The sky too you have given weary notice
and now the pavement acts dismissive of your feet.
Your mother remains out there somewhere,
on the loose and on the move.
None of this do you take personally.
You are alone and have willed it so,
there in the vast stretches of your night.

Titanic

The inconstancy
of words forgotten?

The water cold from the shower head

A reminder of the cries of those
lost at sea

shark bait unheard
by those in the lifeboats

Dance, Man, Dance

We were tired, having been
woken by arguments in the night
the revealing light of day
could not quell, compelling
us to dispatch a posse and place
under house arrest the phrase
“point of view.”
All comrades were suspect.
All aliens as well.
We dwelt for a time in sweet peace.
That happens when you bring
everything back to the now and walk
down Jaffa Street at the beginning
of Shabbat. Someone hurled an egg.
Someone lobbed a rock.
It is all of no consequence
so long as you recognize
faces are interchangeable.
Go ahead, vegetarian, eat that slab
of beef your shriveled heart is set upon.
Add a pound of chocolate and give
your constipated self a good poop.
Everything in the container breaks.
Everything outside comes together.
Reveal this to us, Mr. Physicist.
Now the zealous Lubavitcher
are singing and dancing down the street.
They have their god and we have ours
and maybe it is all one and the same.
In any case, the time has now come
to sit again and focus on our breath.
Someone, if not you, will surely
understand where heaven lies.

Dying

My sister is dying.
She would not be the first.
So the doctors say.

In the dark lightning stabs at the sea
repeatedly, remorselessly,
all the adverbs that apply.

The beer-guzzler under the American
flag beach umbrella takes a bathroom break
in the ocean every half hour.
The world tethered to his hate.

Everything is ghostly in the terrain
you now inhabit. Even your own name
has echoes of something else.

In every warehouse is a body hidden
And a story untold.
Say I didn't tell you so.

The parched field lies open but yields nothing
and plays a waiting game with your life.
Don't hold it to a higher standard than your own.

Once again is my sister dying,
though maybe not.
I am on my way home.

Love Sick

The day was one for love sickness
even with the sun shining down.

He came upon a concert of and for the elderly,
the gray hairs and no hairs with instruments
gathered in the garden of fallen leaves,
rats foraging in the faded grass.

Briefly the trembling violins held him
before he moved on, stunned and deprived,
praying that he be bleached of all longing
and return to the holiness of the now
even if he didn't quite mean it.

Coffee

When they go away
you understand
that they have gone away
by the failure of their eyes
to meet your own,
those eyes telling you it is over
before it even started
because now they know what
you wanted was for them
to go away even as you asked
for them to stay.

Dear Friend

We were stung, flummoxed,
at the end of the line.
No, not the Rock Island Line.
Be serious, like us,
grim beyond all reckoning
as we tell you that yet another rejection arrived,
that our neck hurts worse than ever,
that the valley of the shadow of death
is not simply words on paper,
that brown is the color of our valley
and narrow the bridge of our understanding.
What's that you say? Stop making sense?
That process began a long while ago,
dear friend.

Lovefest

I watched your anger manifest,
fill the pores on your face.

I heard the word *dislike*
spoken in a foreign tongue
as vipers circulated
in your brain.

Which isn't to say
the meal wasn't excellent
and that next time
won't be different.

Walden

Should I have asked
that we meet for dinner
and exchanged my aloneness
way for something other
than an aloneness way?

A question given to the wind
to do with what it will.

At a table meant for two
I now sit, staring at the flow
of pedestrian traffic
In this city I profess to love.

Naugahyde Retreat

I love you.

It is that simple.

But there are reasons

to break bones in the Himalayas

and have coyotes tear at my flesh

in the Pyrenees,

to set sail on long journeys to nowhere

with compass thrown overboard

and receive my mail in the belly of the whale.

Some things, like happiness, cannot be faced

without injury to the self we have created.

I am only trying to explain

what I don't understand

and you will never hear.

You Over There

Father I saw a plane today
flying at a great distance from the earth.

Father, I saw a pelican picking at the bones
of the deceased mistaking them for fish

Father, misunderstandings are all around
and now they have made a home in me

Father, I would tear off my flesh
and put it on yours if only
you would leave me alone

Father, how long must I say that word
and will it echo in eternity?

Hello, Young Lover

Where exactly did you go and whom did you meet
and for how long?

Did you speak to anyone to your left or right
as you approached your mate?

How many suspicious characters are there in your past, and will
you cooperate in presenting them in chronological order?

What taxes were you assessed on your twenty-third birthday
and what did you have for breakfast the day after filing?

What was the nature of the conversation on your last visit
to your dentist and may we please have the transcript?

Can you walk a straight line after dark and during daylight
hours?

Do you know the difference between the former Soviet
Union and your mother?

How many people did you insult today, and can you provide us
with the probable cause?

What is the designated day and hour of your death,
Or would you prefer that we tell you?

Landing Strip

You hear the smartness of strangers
as well as friends, the orderly process
of thought they demonstrate in their speech
and inevitably inventory your own
less agile tongue. Perhaps a trip is in order.
That would make you important. And yet
this morning you cancel your flight abroad.
Solitary travel less appealing
at your age than years before,
when the promise of adventure led you forth.
You think of the money you will have saved,
the new sofa you can buy.
You are home-centered these days, you say.
Your journey now is of a different kind.

Wanderer

You said
you wouldn't go
and then you did.

I stared at a leaf
until its color turned
and then was free to leave.

I wandered in a foreign land
where I was fined
for eating alone.

I heeded the warning
of a dove when invited to
A stranger's home.

Seeing a star in the sky
I called out your name
and continued on.

Report

You didn't want to tell me and yet you did
about the money he borrowed

or how much
and yet you did

before mentioning the letter
you wrote to him the other day

inquiring gently when you could expect
the money back

because you weren't trying to pressure him
but only to assure him that you weren't mad.

I said it pained me to hear you apologize
for asking for what was only yours

and then I said something more, how
if I were to describe him in terms of an animal,

that animal would be a fox and you said yes
he does look like a fox

and then we decided on the date for the next
play in our subscription to a theater

where we spend enjoyable evenings in this,
the twilight of our lives.

Schenectady

This business of Schenectady was fairly grave,
the word written right across our shirt
with the hours of arrival and departure added.
Walking its streets we melted down in love.
This can happen in Schenectady, where the rooms
smell of mold and the toilets overflow
and the little league diamond is lousy with ghosts.
Some appeared to acknowledge our presence,
right there at home plate, thus giving us a footing
in this community that no longer cares to exist.

The President's Briefing

We won't pretend we aren't concerned
seeing Raj carrying bags of cement
he hopes to sell on e-bay

even as his teeth rot in his swollen head.
and no one is eating liver anymore.
The precious few who do stink to holy hell.

This briefing puts aside poll numbers
to stress that those in bed with the devil
can go straight to hell.

Yes yes we hear the deafening noise,
that blaring radio,
but truth does not depend on volume

high or low
and energy invested in a lie
results in only grosser deceit.

We are hanging with the fishes for the nonce,
but count on our presence
when the need for air grows great.

The Word from on High

Father, you forbade us to
write of ourselves and instructed
that we live within the confines of our
own minds, like penned and starving
refugees, and trust in the hard currency
of the objective correlative.

We were disheartened.
Our whole life a lie.
So it had come down from on high.
But though we are in chains
pain is our touchstone
as we stand on the swaying bridge.

Father, today we saw a man
who has positioned himself
as our better.
Father, today we spoke to ourselves
in code, once again seeking
the safe place from his disdain.

Father, these are matters
of which we must speak,
not troop movements across the globe
or the current price of gold
or the tattoo found on Rose's bottom.

Father, have we made ourselves clear?

Julia

Julia, you went and died.
 Your expiration date too soon,
 a perplexing suddenness,
 but what do I know?
 Lately this business of the bardo
 has been occupying my mind.
 Suppose I have gotten it wrong
 and one doesn't spend eternity
 endlessly adrift in a changing
 dreamscape as engrossing as
 any movie? Suppose bardo is
 the blistering heat on a shadeless street
 or a bus station full of derelicts
 and an overflowing toilet?
 All my life comfort has been
 My primary concern and now I sense
 I am in trouble for not doing you right.
 I try my best but people
 irritate me. I did want to tear that
 solemn seriousness right out of
 your pale, puffy face and purge
 you of all hidden intent you might
 have toward me. I saw the bias toward
 death you possessed and the premature
 grayness it had put in your hair. Lady,
 I was a witness to your format and so
 activated all the shunning devices
 at my command. All right, already.
 I failed to acknowledge you
 on the grocery line where you stood
 with can after can of Spam but big deal
 on Madonna Street. For this the gates
 of hell await me? I'm going out now.

Gonna get me an ice cream soda.
 Gonna walk in the sunshine I deserve.
 Gonna save my molecules from madness
 in silent communion with the trees.

July 4, _____

A flimsy fender-less motorbike
the deafening whine heralding its arrival
and the spectacle of the terrifying wheelie
by its helmet-less rider.

On the bus the poem that simply
would not end.
And you, across from me, you've never
simply wanted something to be over?

The faux innocents flinging out
their arms in spasms of malicious
gesturing solely to impede
my progress as I am about to pass

People
things
extending beyond their bounds
like this country of ours

When and When

When they leave your love
in the dustbin with your dreams,
it is only that you have nothing more
they need or want to hear. You are not
the governor of your life nor they of theirs.
Please understand, bleakness
is a passing thing. The light that dies
always shines again
though its day and hour of return
remain forever random.

Time

Your Sicilian patience, signore,
gives you a distinct advantage.
Still there are witnesses to all I say
should you seek to indulge
in any of your trademark funny business.
The whole world will be watching,
my quondam friend.

At the moment I am less afraid of you
than of thugs loitering on these streets
that I must walk. The aggression
they project with their loud sound
turns me back in your direction,
the fire more distressing than
the pot of water you slowly heat.

Connect

My mother forty-three at the time of my birth
she wore rubber stockings for her varicose veins
unaware of the predicate nominative
said it is I
said what ails you
said the air does not move
said you are so willful
said you treat me like the dirt beneath your shoes
said all I want is for us to be in heaven together
said do you know we are living in the last days
said he will come like a thief in the night
Said this world has nothing that I want.

I sit in my kitchen
hearing the hum of the hyperactive
refrigerator and eyeing the grapefruit
on the table
the amber bottle of thyroid medication
the calculator
the jar of pencils
all within easy reach

I have silenced the radio
I need my own thoughts
wherever they may lead
My head a containment center

I will
wash the dishes
let that be the way forward

Wild Thing

After she destroyed me
I sought refuge in the park
along a footpath where people,
the kind who taunt and mock,
are seldom seen to wander.
I talked discreetly to the trees
and showed a friendly face to the sun,
comporting myself as if
shaming eyes were still upon me.

The park had level upon level,
managing to appear in unlikely places.
On one of them two women dealt
powerful kicks to a big round ball.
Back and forth it arced between them
and I could only watch in wonder
the thrust they generated,
and how the height it rose to offered
no lasting escape from
their eager waiting feet.

Neighbor

My neighbor has a dog,
A pit bull that frightens me.

He is offended that I will not ride
in the elevator with him and his dog.

The doorman says he is plotting
something crazy, with or without his dog.

He fights with people on the street
and in the building, too.

Last week he fought with the doorman himself.

Here he comes now, his pooch straining at the leash.
“Hello, ugly dog with your ugly owner,” I say,

In the alleged privacy of my own mind
as I cross the street.

In Passing

Her
bold and brazen
stare
Young and weaponized she was
guitar strapped to her back
en route to the performance stage
as I was exiting
How to tell her I was headed for
a gander
at the vintage locomotive
on display
down the way
a relic
like myself
from another time

Sunday Night

Sunday night on the lonely train
I said I was alone but not lonely
to the heated air.
Instantly my mind shored up.
I tended to it every minute
en route to the cinema.

Tended. Like those men of old
shoveling coal from the tender
into the boiler so the train
could have legs.
So my mind could have
a mind of its own.

Now am I here.
I have found the darkness
I was seeking and in no rush
for the screen to come alive.

My Father

My father was my father.
Let me be clear.
He did not go to the graveyard on his own
nor did he bury my treasure with him.

My father was my father,
no matter that I disowned him.
A son can say this. A son can say that.
A son is not to be discredited
whether murderer or thief
or of the prevaricating kind.

A son by his nature has
unstable substance in his being
and yet his father remains his father.
Have I made myself clear?

The reasons are not arbitrary for
my father being my father
on the days that he isn't
there in the decision-making
province of my mind.

A son goes here.
A son goes there.
A son goes gandy dancing
on the great trains of the West.

My father is just that,
a railroad spanning the continent
and the trains that run on it.

My father, being ironclad,
cannot be left.

My father_____

March 1, 2022

When the bombs began to fall on Ukraine
was when I reached for Thich Nhat Hanh
should the bombs wish to fall on me,
though that is not the full story—
such stories seldom are—
my heart opening on reading
suffering had been his to know as well,
bombs once having come for him and his country too.

The Ukrainian sky has darkened
as bombs rain down harder,
this as I walk with Buddha breath my goal,
that I may sink deeper and deeper
into the shelter we will come
to know as home.

Spring 1962

The night I walked Laura Bentley
home and held her hand
and blurted “I want to marry you someday,”—
prompting her to say “Whoa, whoa”
to my great shame—
was the night before “Duke of Earl”
poured from the radio at the deli
where I bought the six-pack
and headed down the hill into the park
with my childhood friend Jericho
so I could soar over the moon
with the happiness I was feeling.

That same year in ninth grade English
Benvolio told lovesick Romeo
to take some new infection to his eye
that the rank poison of the old might die.
Never would I take such new infection
to my eye and was to learn the meaning
of Maria singing on the screen how
the minutes seemed like hours
in the contemporary version of the play,
this when Laura Bentley went away
and some years before Jericho was found
a gangrened corpse in a Bowery flop across
from where I came to drink the clock around.

It Begins

The train is in motion now,
leaving behind your
brown hair and almond eyes,
your careful and precise speech,
the spell you cast
no train can distance me from.

Scatter

There is little and much to say here in transit
to a city I only passed through as a child.
But memories can snag us, as did
that Baldessari photo of the Modesto
gas station, a longing to be where
I was not as if I had been there once before.
All these vanquished souls I wander with?
Do they have memories too behind
the grit of indigence they wear so faithfully
while scavenging rocks in their quest for permanence?

Mother, I saw a man wrapped in an American flag
to signal his mad devotion.
In a dream of his own was he.
Now from the vantage point of space
I see below the clustering clouds offering
the illusion of softness like the country I live in.

This urge for a distant place,
to be where the mind cannot find me,
to be as forgotten as my race.

On Reading

I read in a language I didn't understand.
 I read the rain in the night when sleep eluded me.
 I read your face like the tarnished book it was,
 then failed to erase you from my memory.
 I heard with one ear reports of crippling deficits
 and with the other the blare of triumph trumpets.
 I unfurled a banner from my window extolling
 the merits of nothingness.
 I heard the words grizzled veteran and grew morose
 but laughed out loud at sockeye salmon.
 Everything was cause for my rejoicing or despair
 yet dry-eyed I remained when the dead entered my dreams
 and placed their consolation prizes at my feet.
 Some things are beyond me, but not the air I breathe. En Route
 In darkness the rain came.
 Now the sun prevails and calls me to it.
 The fortune I would squander on despair
 it is not having, not when daffodils
 and daisies are in bloom. Already
 a victory has been won marshaling
 my happiness for the angry man,
 winning his love for that moment,
 and rejoicing at the skipping child.
 These words that never stop though the rain did.
 Cookie with her snarky voice.
 I wouldn't have it in a prior time.
 The last word was my domain.
 Now silence the answer to everything,
 even apple cores on the cheap
 at the midtown market.
 A barefoot girl runs to her lover
 and those jazz notes from the burnished horn,
 what are they but bebop joy and not
 the stray bullets you imagined.
 You say your integrity was deep-sixed
 somewhere west of the Hudson.
 About that I have no opinion.
 I don't travel much these days.
 Local is now the realm I live in.

In a Dream

My father came for me last night
with soreness in his bearing
that I hadn't come for him.
An old and vexing story,
this coming and not coming,
declaring as a child
to the very air I breathed
myself the son of my mother only
and never to leave her lonely.

This you must understand
in the wilderness of thought I wander:
where violence lives must it be fled,
that savage smacks, the shod foot
the bruised face must bear
require the barring of the door.

Let me forever be a citizen
of the inviolate space,
a nation state of my very own,
and fly my own peculiar flag,

or let me be so bold
as to unbar the door
and come in from the cold.

My Life

You ask me about my day.
It started slowly.
Fell asleep during morning meditation
and felt the weight of failure while sitting
at the computer.
A cup of green tea lifted my spirits,
as did the submission of a small piece
to a magazine. I thought of the people
moving away from me. There are several
transitioning out of my life. The instruction
I have been given is to detach from those
who are detaching from me. I am in earnest
in my attempt to apply this principle.
I am not a posse, after all,
riding hard to apprehend those who would
evade me. The word *justice* has taken on
new meaning. Give people their due.
Acknowledge their gifts if I wish
to set myself free. You say I am
offering tripe but this is the nuts
and bolts of my day, the emotional ins
and outs I must navigate.
I worked on the novel for several hours.
Made some progress while telling myself
success was no prerequisite for joy.
In the late afternoon I did my stretching
and balance and weight-bearing exercises
to Marvin Gaye, then did what I could
to make myself presentable for the street.
On my power walk around the loop
a train sped past in the tunnel
below, bringing with it the longing
for new vistas. And a woman with her dog,
in passing me, made eye contact,
as if to say I was worthy of her curiosity.
Not a small event in the life of an older man.
That night I treated myself to a dinner
of ginger tamari salmon with kale and squash
and brown rice, preceded by a dish of
spicy sesame noodles at a local macrobiotic
restaurant, then pushed through my fear
to see a movie about a young woman

wrongfully institutionalized and abused
by a stalker impersonating a male nurse.
No, the terrorists did not come, but I was
in a state of high vigilance against their
arrival, as I was for the advent of bedbugs
seeking to hitchhike home with me.
One thing more. On the escalator down
to a desolate exit a man drew near.
He wore a long coat and kept one hand
in his pocket. On the street I turned,
feeling him virtually on my back.
“Is there something you want?” I asked,
whereupon he screamed his loneliness
in my face. This can happen,
whether in the city or on a country lane.
I left him where he was, with the
consolations I could offer.
At home I bolted the door,
as you can never be sure
where these things might end.

Wander

I was in love,
the hopeless love of an old man
for someone so much younger.
However I arranged my face
it spoke of need.
I turned down the avenue,
my hood up against the Saturday night cold.
The buildings had abandoned all sense.
Their bricks dripped blood.
The doormen wore big guns.
Yes, I saw the couples.
Yes, I saw the duplicity of held hands.
I was footloose in the city. Free to roam.
However you might wish to say it.

Magical

Forgive me for saying, but your big head was a magnet for my eyes. Yes, I should have restrained myself but instead I waned, needing to be sure it was in fact you. Also, may I say, it is not every day that we have the opportunity to transcend differences, to be brought together, to relate as one, and all that good stuff it can make us uneasy to even mention; we have all felt the icky quality of such sentiment in a world devoted to ferocity. Well, days have passed, and you are still present in my mind. On this we both agree: the performances that night were magical, having seen sufficient theater to know when something special is happening—when the beast beneath the civilized soul is laid bare, and we can only feel blessed to have borne witness to it. I should mention Al Pacino and the face he committed to gravity in *The Godfather* years ago. You would have been alive as well, though a few years younger than me. Back then you were quite the hoodlum, and yet tender too, weeping when you learned your mother had died. This last would be in the category of a salient fact, but let us leave it there, as dwelling on your humanity might prove dangerous. How quickly a tender moment can become mawkish, and that we must always defend against. My point is only this: then, as now, after last week's performance, the desire was awakened in me to be on stage as well, to be unbound and adored, with the stars looking down in sadness at their usurped function. United we were in our fever, you and I, to be legends beyond the borders of our minds.

Q & A

You ask me where my love has gone,
to which I answer:
Somewhere betwixt the sun-soaked isles
of Majorca and Mozambique.

You are a rogue, sir, with your flippant tongue,
and with no intention to reform.
So I hear you say.

And so I ask of you the same.
Where has your love gone?
To the sullen pit beneath the broken sidewalk?
The charred ruins wrought
by the arsonist in the night?
The folds of the funeral crepe you are swaddled in?

I have seen the dreariness of your décor,
your dedication to the dark,
have seen you swimming with the sharks
on moonless nights
and lying with the sated snakes in the back of caves.
I know the tenor and the thrust of your confining way,
the countdown you would begin to my final day.

Falling

No monotony
in the falling snow.
The drama in
the falling, falling

as I am falling
through my sequestered day,
falling into sleep,
falling for you.

Now the rain has come
to wash away
the fallen snow
but you are still here

animate
enduring
as if you never
went away.

Words Spoken

Father, a woman sought my elevation
with words meant to flatter,
drawing my firm response
that I was but another
bozo on the bus.

These fires are everywhere
and must be extinguished
if ash is not to be our destination.

Father, we each have our own meaning
now and forever
in the silence you maintain
without explanation.

From the Bench

The trucks are making a ruckus
as the cars pass silently.
And the awnings. They are stretched tight.
Harry walks listlessly
while Jane is master of her stride.
Atop the building burns a light,
marking the spot for a secret
landing in the night.
Over and over Andrew writes on the air
it is a blessing to be ordinary
as Sinatra sings from the grave.
You say we can't get there from here
by just sitting.
You just watch.

Uncovered

It is your old love I ache for now,
your saying you would have left him
if only you had known
rising in black and white
from the pages of my journal,
my heart charged with renewed longing
by this forgotten entry from yesteryear
canceling the face currently in my midst.
A place has been set aside for sorrow
that I could have made you cry
wrapped in my smallness as I was,
with the bigger picture nowhere in sight.

Hear Me

The wounded child cries out
to those who lack the ears to hear.
The rooms are cold,
the air indifferent.
A boy with a strange gift
wears a snake about his neck.
Another receives lessons
in telephone etiquette
while mothers eat ice cream sundaes
and hot fudge is the topic of the day.
Loneliness awaits all strangers to themselves.
So reads someone from a prepared text.
Don't live in your own certainty,
says a voice from above,
roused from his snooze on the crescent moon.

Mother

When we see the children alive
who now are dead we weep
and flee into the darkness
seeking our long gone mother,

saying Mother,
where is the holy moment
when you sped from the kitchen
at the sound of gunfire
and turned off the TV,
shouting we cannot have this.

Only this would we ask:
what painful deed in your hidden
past led you with such urgent need
to still those guns?

The Visit

I wasn't caring for him, the young man.
There was a hurt that tainted my concern.
I felt absent from his regard, let alone his love,
the sense persisting that I had been quietly
devalued and replaced. And yet I went to him
there in the cancer ward, the scar
from the surgeon's scalpel an angry red
ringing his neck. I held his gaze in my own
as we sat together, he in his hospital gown,
and when I left felt good that I had come,
that I had done the mitzvah required of me
if I am to walk upright on this earth.
Afterward I rode on a subway line
new to me and to this city that I love
and yet at times have the wish to flee
in search of the novelty I briefly found
in the underground transit.
The thought occurred of a bold flight
to some South Seas island and I lived
in anticipation of that invigorating journey
into the night and had it for my own until
the new day came, bringing with it
doubt and indecision: the high maintenance
I now need for my fragile back
and the loneliness that might find me
sitting by myself in a foreign restaurant
and other issues too personal for this page
or the time I might appropriate
for more useful things before
the day for final departure has come.

Purge

The idea that everything you have written
must be burned erased repudiated,
the rantings of an immoderate man
starting with the trunk in your closet
packed with juvenilia
to manuscripts fatter than
the phone books of yore.
Nothing must be left behind

and your thought stream sanitized,
your old man's lust surfacing
as you head home with groceries,
the recitation of ice cream flavors
you call on to distract from Anna
in the glory of her blond beauty,
struggle at times as you do
with the urges of your decrepit body.

Finish your vegetarian chili and rice
and the salad you have prepared for yourself.
Night has seeped in and only just begun.
Best not to be awake for what it will bring.

Bomb Squad

It's true you didn't ask for my number.
I came to you having heard your head
was now a helium balloon
and the threat level high for explosion.

Please understand.
While I have no bomb squad credentials,
I have experienced eruptions of my own
and the massive reconstruction
that had to follow.

As mad rule
of my alcoholic realm was nearing an end
I threatened mayhem
on a man who had done me only solids.

The deactivation you are seeking
lies in surrender, I can safely say,
here under a streetlight observing
a man with his head in his hands
as he waits for the crosstown bus.

Word on the street is that heads
operate best out of our hands,
Lest they miss what's going on.

Sonnet Berlin

I had some idea where I needed to go
but no itinerary for getting there.
It can be that way when you are far from home,
your mother's shadow lingering
in the middle of metropolitan train stations,
as once upon a time in such a venue
you held her linen-gloved hand before
The call of freedom grew too strong.
Benign presences abound in our midst
such as the towering ficus at the horticulture show
or the nimble tightrope walker performing for your eyes only.
Soon the stars will lower and get in on the act.
Things coming together even as they fall apart.
That is all I mean to say.

Exiting Central Park

I was following the sun
as it moved over the horizon
in the dusky light the buildings
made memorable
as too the red traffic light
the scampering child
the careworn mother.

I was tired

and feeling ill.

Still the voice persisted:

This is your life.

Don't miss it.

Below Canal

The intellectual element of the rain
went to his head and made him a star
at the Cuyahoga Tavern
where he drank on his customized stool
only cutting edge German beer
to chase his top shelf scotch.
He had no problem so long
as the moon glow
of his sustenance stayed with him
and Freddy Fender sang his passionate
love songs on the jukebox so he could
walk out alive to meet the day or night
whichever came first there in the betwixt
and between of his life.

Night Out

The rats were having their way,
busy underfoot.

The restaurants offered no protection.
Infested they were, all of them,
vermin plunging from the ceiling
into your mulligatawny soup.

Best to go home
the night no longer calling,
offering only the loneliness
of strangers
indifferent to the whereabouts
of their own minds.

You have built a castle.
Now summon yourself to it.
The pounding surf, the clifftop view,
the dominance of stone to ensure
your manufacture of mystery.
No impediments to your progress,

all lights flashing green.
It is for you to live where
you have only visited,
not a resting place
but a permanent abode
deep within the silence.

Taking the Plunge

I wondered when I would
fall out of the sky

land with a thud at your door
preventively closed to love,

the premises vacated
by your stealth move in the dark.

It's true my mind was filled
with twisted metal thoughts

wreckage amassed
in the tangle of a life

even the air in a conspiracy of silence
as to your name let alone whereabouts

Yes I have seen home fires burning
leading to houses in flames.

One doesn't need a civil war for that,
only postmortems left in the rain

for whoever happens by.

Night Moves

He said for an idea to come
I must leave my bed and experiment

as there is no room for the creative spark
within my routines.

Tonight I will sleep on my sofa
next to the window
so the stars can look down.

Should I grow restless,
I will find another
and still another.

I will enter the night in strange spaces
and let it wash over me for the newness

I've been instructed to seek
or grow balky and hide from its reach.

Checking In

Where he would go
the sun thwarts him
tormenting his skin
and aligning with his nemeses.

The lampposts lack purpose
in this brutal light.

No one has come up
the walkway
in days.

It is lonely here.

Moving On

Father, I saw you in the rain.
It had no containing borders.
We wandered through cities
small towns other parts.

You said the world was yours
so long as we kept moving.
Food fell from trees you had befriended.
Church doors remained open.

Locals had their dictionaries
in hand should you care to speak.
I had brought gloves
should the weather turn cold.

Women whose gaze you met
said you were a farce of nature,
going out of their way to be unkind.

Gardens came into view.
We saw over fences into domiciles
we could access only from afar.

Awareness came as to where we were.
Our feet grew a little lighter.
The rain fell a little harder.

Status Report

I'm old.

I have the hairs of the elderly.

You know where.

My doctor will be repulsed.

Is my murderer approaching?

What is this wind from beyond the Arctic,
this earth taking on new shape?

Words all for naught.

My hip. It has begun to hurt.

The hospital. It has run off.

Going About

Among the posturing trees
an attitude of restlessness,
their roots buckling the narrow sidewalk.
The bishop's crook lampposts
Stand more sedately,
a reminder of history's pageant
with their lights shining softly.
In the corner building
pockmarked with holes
a doorman welcomes home
returning tenants in a foreign tongue,
his hair on fire with nighttime love.
Is it any wonder?
So we hear you ask.

Love Me Do

You were committed to watching
Sam Fuller's *Pickup on South Street*

until you weren't
the past having nothing to offer

but dark tunnels
the smell of Coney Island grease

wet wool
strong whiffs of the embalmed corpse you got too close to

a report card with its front teeth missing
coat hangers dangling in the back alley wind

Dionne Warwick singing "Anyone Who Had a Heart"
there at cliff side where all things meet.

Tonight

The city is dark tonight.
It smells of its own defeat.
The words enduring and forever
are written for none to see.
There are those who would look
to the heavens but it too
has gone black.
A man has his hand in a jar
and can't get it out.
Another smells of mayonnaise.
One dreams of the tuna fish
sandwich he ate in childhood.
Another says it was never any good
with no desire for pronoun clarification.
Such is the flatness the world is seeking
to lie down in.
No one in a hurry to get there.

Love on the Run

I should have told you sooner
that mine is a skittish love
wary of entrapment
that you must always come to me
lest I be plain in your sight.
Even now I see myself driving away
under a canopy of trees
in a part of the world
where you are not.
Such is my commitment
to the distance that must follow
when closeness dares appear.

In This Time of Clear and Present Danger

In the dream that mostly got away
I was engaged in riotous laughter,
the kind that can attract misunderstanding
when indulged in publicly,
as that time on acid in the long ago

when I laughed in a policeman's face
and then, assuming he knew everything,
held out my wrists for cuffing.
Here in dreamland I had no sense
of imminent threat, only the excitement

of breaking through, of walking
where I had never been
in a time beyond memory's reach.
Now the day has taken me back,
an irate father barking public

and disproportionate anger
at his trembling child
for standing without permission.
We hear these stresses and fissures
in our waking state, like the young man

with the thick hair and his stream
of chatter about nuclear payloads
and the threshold for annihilation
as his date framed him in the context
of the little boy lost he was,

calmly waiting for the understanding
to arrive that she was the bomb
ticking away before him.

Gone

This road, you have been
down it before
taken the bait
been strung along

in that one moment
she seeing
you lacked the strength

to hold her in place
and flew back to Florida
after saying she wouldn't

your bouquet of lilies wilting
on her living room floor
in their paper wrapping.

Out!

You're just a young man with a big head,
he said to the doctor, who threw him out.

No matter.

He walked wearily to the museum
for Christmas cards. 'Twas the season.

There among the Picassos Hoppers
whatnot

he had some thoughts,
none of them worthy of posterity.

Here they are anyway.

You have to understand
that the sexual urge doesn't

just die out in many older men.
Thus (yes he really said that)

great restraint is required.
The energy must be redirected.

He could say no more.

It was time to eat.

Biography

The block held tidings of great joy.
Marble was inlaid in the heads
of all minors to make us last
longer than the tops we spun
and offer protection from
the oncoming traffic we dodged
in our P.F. Flyers.

A geezer wheeled his cart down
the block, calling out "I buy old gold,"
bringing even the dead to attention.

A coal truck unloaded its cargo
down a chute. The earth rumbled.

The Eisley Brothers wore their
hair conked and ditty bopped
their days away.

Longing to be by the river's side,
A Studebaker struck and killed
Billy Neuman as it sped
down the hill.

Lonnie Lesdemento had Lionel trains
but no one got to see them.

At the end of the endless alley
a Chinese restaurant beckoned.
The smell awakened our hunger,
and so began our journey.

On Broadway

Embracing the sense
of belonging to the dark
the calabash gourds
Lie strewn on oil-slicked streets
and urchins run rampant in lampshade hats.

I walk with my one self
here and there
touching nothing
lest it touch me.

Such is the manufacture
of the discontent
I allowed to burden me
soon after my arrival.

That happens
when you turn the corner onto Broadway
in the shorts your mother laid out for you
and understand
if she doesn't
that your bare legs are too thin for exposure
and that you must turn back.

And so the cover-up begins,
the deadly earnest searching
for the peace of mind
that begins with your right to a place

at a table for one
where with knife and fork
and your single plate
you may begin
your evening meal.

Out with It

I honestly don't know
what you're talking about.

So I said, prompted to break
the intolerable silence.

And please spare us your assertion
that you have never done the same.

What *is* to be done?

Our moving feet deliver us.
A gentle breeze.

Freshly mown grass.
Warm sunlight on pale skin.

Poem

You ask me what it means.
I just wrote it is all I can say.
You look at me with disappointment.
I have seen that look before.

High above the street I wrote it
as I write one every day. This I could say.
Sometimes I write while walking down the street.
One line for every ten steps.

Never while sleeping, though not quite true.
Many come from dreams. A reality otherwise
unknown allowing me to break on through,
as holler head Morrison sang.

You thought I didn't know Jim Morrison?
Wait, you ask me who Jim Morrison is or was?
I wonder if I really have time for you.
I wonder if you are my poem.

I think you must be.
You showed up, after all,
and everything has its purpose,
is grist for the literary mill.

Besides, it's how does a poem mean,
at least so someone said in an essay
bearing that title which I read
and cannot remember a word of.

Fire and Ice

The cutting cold is not for canceling
by an abundance of heat
but lived through and endured.
So the message of the hoodies
slow-walking down the icy street
staying strong in arctic blasts
as you bear miserable witness,
the trio challenging you to shed
your winter garments and enter
the test of grit you cannot win,
coddled soul that you are.

Click

Because
Facebook
love
can be
real love
too.

Like when
you come
to the post
of the one
you loathe
and click
like.

Song

The robin
at my window
sings to me,
ushering sadness
out the door.
Happiness it brings
and even love.
Like some old song
needing to be heard
it just keeps turning up.

Can We Meet?

I thought to head to Washington
and speak plain to the president.
I thought to tell him what was
on the mind of the nation state
I represent,
to talk from the heart about law

and disorder and what it is to dwell
in the land of destitution
while spiritual illiterates
fumble with a faux constitution
for the lining of their pockets.

Perhaps I would mention
how when noxious utterance
seeks my inflammation
I focus on breathing in
and breathing out,

and from a place of centeredness
laugh at those who hold
to the notion that they have my number,
asserting my power to hold my own
against the collective fisheye,

breaking it down
into individual units
while summoning my inner crazy.

When the time was right,
I would bypass the monuments
for this Ethiopian restaurant
where I've heard it said
you can eat with your fingers.

Cloud Cover

The gaseous cloud I only noticed
as I was leaving but it is a simple truth
that perspective often requires distance.
Right now I am making headway

through a thicket of trees
where whisperers abound,
their secret love requiring muted cries.
Meanwhile marshaling from above continues.

The reception so far is tentative
but I tell myself what was shall also be,
that the past is indeed prologue to the future,
though maybe this phrasing is ill-considered,

given some of what was left behind.
Language can be treacherous.
Nothing buoys us like the spirit,
which now we wait upon.

Apropos your love gone wrong,
I too have had my aches and pains
and long-term bruises. Movement
has proven a considerable answer.

Perhaps you will banish me
to the provinces of your heart,
not unlike those legions of the lost
in cardboard lodgings by the roadside.

Well, whatever, the ducks are out
of alignment but remain afloat.

To a Friend

When the moon does not respond,
forsaking of our best face,
we must turn resolutely within
for the light it can only reflect
and there find the light of love
we have been seeking,
amore of its own kind
sustaining and nourishing
and altogether free.

I understand your preference
for Jim Beam in a lust-filled setting
but listen if you will this once.
Your time for understanding
may not come again.

Listen

Mother, the towers of the righteous
were crumbling. The structures of innocence
could not hold their own against the dark.
Words spoken with great authority
fell down dying at the feet of those
who uttered them.

Mother, I saw the red leaves
of a well coiffed tree.
I drank a soda in the rain.
I gave succor to a dying plant.
I said the words holy moly
for old times sake and overheard
a man debate for hours
whether to eat an omelet
en route to a graveyard
named Forever.

Mother, I am a slave
to Raymond Chandler
in my desperation for the past
and too have noted the growing
impatience of words,
how they no longer stand in line
but defiantly burst their order
with wild claims of interplanetary origin.

Mother, I have arrived in a strange city,
where a child wears Fig Newtons for earrings.
It is the lunch hour. We are in real time,
the time for chowing down.
Plastic bags dangle from the hands
of the men and women of America.
From the Hoagie Palace do they stream
with their spherical content.
I am in thanks for the distance
I have been granted from my own desire
that I may see them in their fundamental aspect
and journey on my own path.

Optic Nerve

Father, I have just come from the eye doctor.
My optic nerve is irregular but stable.
The wind is strong and not at my back.
Darkness has arrived early,
as it does in these parts.
Joggers streak past with their dogs
on long leashes.
The unconditional love of a pooch.
Is it something I could reciprocate?
I'm now in a café drinking overpriced tea
and seeing you as you were years ago,
a smile meant for no one in particular
on your sagging face, a smile that
vanishes when you walk through the door.

What Hopper Knew

Even then
in the stillness of the lighthouse
there were premonitions
from the restless gulls
of the tumult to come
they too fearing the loss
of a space in the heavens or on earth
they could call their own.
No one turned them away
no barriers were erected
and yet it was for them to understand
the tower's light couldn't last
that love could hold out only so long
before succumbing to the night.

Lights Out

I sought out the dark
taking along those who dislike me
and the reasons they might have:

loudmouth
old goat
horse's ass

the cold wind's steel teeth
tearing at my face

The trees silently plotting
their time to fall

The streets deserted
multitudes bonded to their screens

You can smell the decay from outer space.
So the astronaut said, adding

The moon was offended by the lechery
of the planet's winking lights.

Eternity will be here in a flash.
So the lamppost spoke.

Not soon enough! We're tired of your bushwa,
An indigent screamed

even as I emptied my pockets
and stuffed my wallet down the drain.

Call and Recall

His life a marriage to indecision,
the fog of one day surpassed
by the clarion call of the next
with no recall of all that had
come and gone, leaving
no mind for the synthesis
all together might bring,
a voice saying we will find
what we have wrestled with
in the bushes of yesteryear
or by the gnarled trunk
Of the dying tree. *All is forgiven.*
These last seen briefly
in the dispersing clouds.

Shall We Gather

The elements were not in place for happiness
though pandemonium was nowhere near the gates.
Not in my marketplace. Not on my watch,

from atop the crenellated tower I vowed.
In reality I was tired.
That can happen when people ask things of you

and when they don't as well.
It does seem options are being presented
and I'll need the patience to fathom them.

For example, the difference between
sacrifice and deprivation
or a pretty face and chocolate cake.

Just be aware that words can get in the way
even when they possess a linear
likeness to an arrow.

High stakes abound and I'm nowhere near Las Vegas.
How do you like them apples?
Sudden storms are the ones

To look out for, arriving as they do
with evangelical fervor.
And what a rebus really means. Jesus!

A dose or two of Thich Nhat Hanh couldn't hurt.

Old

He was in the prepared foods section now
staring at the vegetarian chili.
His dinner most nights.
Heated in his one pot.
Eaten in his one bowl.
Clean as you go.
So he was told.
He began to tremble
imagining the cataclysm.
All interdependence gone.
Foragers now,
everyone on their own.
Maybe it was that travel book,
Tibetans eating raw yak meat off the bone
In a house reeking of excrement.
Maybe it was the weight of his eighty years
And the grayness even in sunlight
that would not leave him alone.

Stuff of Life

I was hungry.
If only I could eat
a poem would surely follow
to save me from myself.
One knows when it is time
to give birth or die.

The museum offered refuge
from disturbing trends.
Carmody's Waxworks headed for ruin.
Autoworks Inc. increasingly unstable.
Commodities Centralia drowning in fish oil.
No phone booths anymore to change in.

Such was the reality.
So the documentary said.
The sound of a flute.
Dreamy sort of music
like waves
relaxing to the mind.

Vowel sounds brought bouillabaisse
and baba ganoush to the tongue that spoke them.
Music could be my food.
Provide me with a nourished soul.
Gratitude filled my face
for the supportive chair on which I sat,

for not feeling alone on a Saturday night.

Out of Order

Things were not working right.
The out of order sign was everywhere.
A man spoke of his wife.
I told him of my ex, saying
ambivalence affects all relations
and minor tremors can precede earthquakes.

Why not write out his conception of God
or his resentment against the deity?
Before he could answer
I went running in the dark,
The police everywhere
we joggers were not.

This was Sunday night.
The city was imploding.
In the autumnal blackness
the trees were free to profess their concern
as overfed rats tottered past my feet.
It was no matter until I heard

a small child cry
and a drunk howl
and felt their pain.
My attention turned to the foul wind,
how it kept blowing
with no one around to stop it.

Eye to Eye

Now as you sense
the end approaching
you have taken
finally
to looking in their eyes
as women know to do
with their searchlight gaze
seeking the one standing
behind the façade.

It is only this.
Before you leave
you want the courage
to see who
you have been among,
if not with.
You say you owe yourself
and perhaps the world
that much
in the way of curiosity.

Into the Silence

From the beginning
internal limits
locking into place
regarding the level
of sound permissible
to surround let alone
invade the premises
of his being.

That morning
the cleaning women
outside his door
carpeting the environs
with their morning chatter
in a foreign tongue
before he tore it with a shout,

leading one in English
to fire off her blunt
and bludgeoning retort:

“A man you are not,
and may you rot.”

Outside his window
leaves were falling
from the trees,
browning the earth
around them,
as they had been seen
to do elsewhere,
saying to him
he was home
with his life
wherever
he might be.

Song

When the women sang
I began to cry
and pleaded
for all discourse to cease
that I might live forever
in their sweet sound.

Earlier I had drunk
from the poison well
of jealousy, walking streets
long hidden from the sun
past stores forgotten
even by their owners.

They had seen
their own ghosts
and so had I
in the existential moment
Of complete aloneness.

To bring things current,
you can find me in the back row
at the Paris Theater,
just across from the Plaza,
or whatever it is now called.

Look

A fog of disbelief.

A burn blister mounded on my finger.

The whole world latent pain?

The manhole covers bear watching.

Even the innocent equipped with teeth.

Radio

But it's not enough
and has never been enough
though there was a time you thought it was
the walls closing in on you
and that steady stream of babble
the worthless words a torment
and so you go inside
that place where walls and words
cannot come and relax in the peace
that you have found
your pain driving you
where you need to go
today and tomorrow
and for all of your days.

Follow

Throughout we remained in formation
tailgating on the trail of your lie
oblivious of the whiteness
of the clouds. At journey's end
you appeared in red legal briefs,
your legs pale and thin and veiny.
In your hand a dubious writ
certifying your innocence.
Hairs sprouted, unsightly,
from nose and ears.
In a croaking voice you continued your defense
there amid the detritus you had created.
Soon the shadow of death made you smile,
your companion all the while.

Moving On

As I was boarding
you complimented me
on my suitcase,
prompting a murmur of thanks.
Not until the ferry crossing
could I give a fuller response,
if only in my mind, share
its carry-on size and travel history.
You, of course, had moved on,
your comment but a moment in time
like the aerial display of the gulls.
But here I remain, at the ready
to pass through any door
slightly open to your love.

Leaving the Island

I thought to first add another layer
to provide the warmth I now am missing
but urgency requires I speak to the sense
of community fading away before me,
Frith and Foster and Sokol and Solar,
the whole crew along the shoreline
with their unsuspecting storefronts.
The ocean does not rise for the sake of it.
Stay with this a moment,
then act from the understanding
you have been led to,
as not everything needs spelling out,
especially for those of us
with loved ones no longer here.

Hello

Then I was lost in your voice
and to your voice,
your excellence
enclosing me once again.

The angle you came
at me from a surprise,
your radiant smile removing
my mask of indifference.

And yet all of this only forestalls
the admission of my pain
and the urgency of my need
to flee before you saw me bleed
as you knew I would.

Fire

The rain didn't come so often now.
It had its reasons.
Mostly the fire,
licking with its long tongue.

Women were afraid to speak.
An open mouth might bring
an uninvited and scorching kiss.
No man can master his desire.

So a truth teller spoke
out on the avenue,
shamanistic in his weathered visage
and elaborate headgear.

He brought his own brand of fire,
causing women to tread carefully.
A specimen, one wrote.

Property of the Museum of Natural History,
came the verdict of another.
Friction gave and it took away.
It was the way the world worked,

someone dared to say,
the age of fire escapes having passed.

Reprobate—FIX

Though I stand outside the gates
of your defining excellence
I too have journeyed,
this last time to a printer
whose name I have maddeningly forgotten.
En route an omelette was served me,
cooked to a placid yellow,
but I had lost my appetite.
“There. There,” said the hand-waving chef.
“Where? Where?” I replied.
A chasm of misunderstanding having grown,
he sought to bridge the gap, making me
the gift of an Australian coat
with patches in odd places.
Slumber called to me, and when I awoke
Signor Castellini was there to meet me
with glad tidings and great joy.
“You have arrived,” he declared, his words
floating free of the wave of his mustache.
It was true. All I needed was right before me.
But long-term equanimity I was denied.
An accusation was unjustly made.
The weight of being told you are
on the wrong side of the law
beyond imagining
without having been there.

Solar

Investigations were ongoing. Trust me, Mr. Delfinado had all the files and if I make a face it is an involuntary expression repudiating everything he stands for, including gluttony, as who, may I ask, ate all the biscuits if not the toady one? But no reason to call it a day. The eclipse is in town, the universe calling me from my space of smallness into the larger realm. Everywhere was I turned away in my pursuit of safety glasses so solar destruction could not have its way. My malignancy meter was in place and operational. If these poor souls only knew the goods I had on them with every insincere “Sorry” that they spoke. Not that stones will now be cast at their indifference, seeing I was free to return to YouTube and let the world go where it would. Tomorrow would I return to Mr. Delfinado that his “case” might be carried to completion and leave me to continue with my own in this matter of earthly doings.

Where You Are

The impediments to the fulfillment of my desire
were of no consequence as I fell off to sleep
and surely journeyed far and wide
in dreams that elude my memory.

No matter.

Down below, on the avenue,
my friend the one-eyed moviegoer
willfully continues his self-containment thing.
He is the movie, titled *The Art of Concealment*,
A documentary on deadness from the waist up.

I don't know what makes any of us
come alive.

Not really.

We just keep fishing, I suppose,
like in the good old days.

Meeting Up

On entering the forest you exclaim
“The rain-freshened air. The wild trees,”
driven by emotion to a distant time
feeling you have been here before and will
likely return on this spiral long bent
on creating the inevitability
of past and future destinations.

Now to find yourself in another phase
of the journey as you encounter
the beast with the basilisk eye,
her captive in tow,
and babbleocity (your word) afflicts you,
the dynamic of their entity
your undoing in that moment.

But it is no matter, foolish boy.
The infection from her scorn has been healed
by your rectifying offer
to assist in any way you can.
Your inner light has turned green.
Yes, of course look left and right,
but then be on your way.

Hello

We will assume for the moment
that no mortal wound resulted from your failure
to heed the call,

and simply note that clauses in your personal
contract contain hooks to peg your life
to the realm of ruin, that the plane

will not take off or stay aloft.
What more can we give you,
foolish boy, before you choose to live?

Courage is not lounging in the back of a cave
nor buttermilk pancakes in the neighborhood diner
nor hoarding the rusted remains of your old Subaru.

But let us for now retreat
from the dead-end street of attempted definition
into the prospect of fields of play.

Say hello to the delphiniums,
the marigolds,
the lilacs in their weighty fullness.

Let us pray for the living and the dead.
Let us look forward to a walk in the park
at the end of another day.

Weather Report

The banks have gone home early.
The stores are closing too.
Sweeping gestures rule the land.

We have come to the pier
agliter with night light
where

shoelaces untied
shirt untucked
Shuggy sings:

What I care
buildings up
buildings down?

A man sits apart
from the breakneck
movements of the twits.

High above on the nonstop to Rome
someone with reason to believe
her future lies ahead of her.

All is good in America
if you only believe it so.

Jitney

I am tired now
 slumped and secure here in my seat.
 Heaven has reached down and hell is on notice
 heading west into the sun.
 This passing of the greening trees
 with more to come.
 The tops of passengers' heads
 visible and vulnerable
 above the chair backs.

The need to say something, anything,
 before the mountain of debt comes due.

A thought of Joe Christmas,
 Some fragment from the past,
 though it was I who ran wildly
 through the woodland night
 while fire brought the cabin to the ground.

We have to effect healing where we can.
 This I say to you, sister, in my unfettered thoughts.

We have made a stop.
 People saying their farewells.
 A baby on board.
 The driver does a head count
 as the sun continues its descent.
 Brave of him to care.

There are marvels of science
 that could not touch this moment.

Sister, if you are concerned about the dream
 trust that this is a time of relative innocence
 and that you harmed no one nor did I.

This fishing you did off the pier
 for the extended sentence in the murky waters below.
 It can never stop entirely.
 Life is only pauses at this point,
 the momentum simply too much
 for anything else.

We are at a stoplight now.
A man with madness within his reach
says Nova Scotia salmon is on his breath
if only I would have the stomach to dig it.

The trees have begun to dance in place,
revealing their longing for latitude of expression.

Once it is said it cannot be taken back.
So asserts the thunder hiding behind the sun.

Now the light is seeking a comeback,
Wishing to be more blinding than it is.

On the pathway to oblivion,
one man feeling smaller than another.
Can you relate?

Bag check door check
the check I made out
as inadequate payment
for the love you had
to lose.

Mother

Soft early evening breeze
the waning sun
strollers hand in hand
flowers I have no name for
June 10, 2021
Mother, where are you really?
This on the umpteenth anniversary
of your passing.

Sprung

“Too internalized,”

she said.

A verdict not to be disputed.

Three times a day

I would seek to go within,

to have the light brighten.

For a brief while

I thought I was in love.

Not in a carnal way.

But received.

Those two words the spring

that sprung me.

En Route to Louise

Gina, please to understand that in a few short years the tyranny of your beauty will no longer enslave. I address you as a man without a sense of style, my madras shirt hanging out over my disappearing butt and a pair of clodhopper shoes on my enormous feet. If you could have offered something, just something, instead of my words bouncing off you. It absorbed me that you work from home in your pajamas and often don't brush your teeth until 2 pm. You said your boyfriend was breaking up with you, that he shouted he was tired of your shit, but that you suspected it was another one of his impotent threats. Right then I saw the power of your charm. At the moment I am with vagabond men on a train headed out of town to see a man who is ill and even more ancient than ourselves. I detest the old fools and make excuses for not sitting with them. Save me from my fate. Has any plea been plainer or more futile than this?

September 2012

Going Gone

You ask me where my love has gone
and for the vicinity of impending violence.

Both remain in a circuitry that does
not answer to any plan.

A songbird sang and then fell dead.
I brought it back to life with my own tongue.

Seven times I drowned in fetid waters
only to revive.

All along I have been open to the waves of eternity
while lacking any reservation about the coming dawn.

When Pinprick Eyes said "You're dead,"
indifference spared me from his lead.

Believe this if you wish.

Fallen

You say your birthplace remains in your heart
but have you seen the sharply pointed steeples?
Suppose God fell from the sky onto one?
How would you feel to be so run through?

It happened to a friend years ago.
His older brother pushed him out the window
accidentally on purpose—
remember when we said that all the time?

There he was impaled on the fence below.
Oh God (that word again, I know),
the pain this life can summon.
No, we don't have to dwell on that,

or Lionel trains from many years past
and our friend Billy who bragged of having
them but never invited us over.
There's a lot of fear when you're young.

It can be hard to open up.
God knows (there I go yet again) what they will find.
But about one particular house—do you know it?
I see it empty now amid the fallen leaves,

a cold wind blowing and an angel
with yellowed wings
lying outside its battered door.

Tea Break

Only rarely do you find a woman looking at you
with a hint of interest prompting the impulse
to address the sorrow space in her life
but the time and place are not here
and have not been for the years
walking alone through airports
and faraway cities if not in your dreams.
The look she offered will be the treasure
that you hold to your heart for that day
even as you are restrained from reciprocating,
some anger, some disappointment,
some feeling you cannot get near
and yet sense even with the inner smile
that came when she set eyes on you.
Because you don't mean to be mean, don't mean
to be withholding, but you were led to something
that has not worked so now you must postpone
until tomorrow as only then if ever will you
be able to see what you can maybe do.

Hopper, 1941

Legions have been lost here,
searching the bordering woodland
for the missing sweets of childhood,
that Grimm's fairy tale of creatures
coming upon the lighted house
with a strategy for its taking.

The road narrow, the trio of gas pumps
a luminous cherry red,
the attendant focused on the task at hand.
The war is on, but his bald head
says he is old for the fray.
Home awaits, the crackling radio,
the brio of some big band.

This is harder than you thought,
imagining a time not your own
where you linger trying to make it so.

Faites Attention

Seeing my umbrella,
she asked if it was raining.
I said I did not know.
This in the elevator going down.

She spoke of a husband
who no longer came home
and a daughter lost to the pull of drugs,
of her dog who recently she put down
and the drink she so needed
to bring the evening to life.
I asked if she was seeking the end,
if that was her heart's desire,
eliciting from her a startled cry.

The rain was falling mercilessly.
This we now could see,
standing at the lobby's edge,
my offer of a shared umbrella
no lure for her.
"I must turn back
but for sure we'll meet again
where we met today, outside
the apartments where we both
are living to die."

Only fair that her turn should come
to elicit from me a startled cry.

Speak

The universe had something to say.
close but no cigar it will always be.

We reserved for our self the right to revile,
giving full expression to our pain.

Oh God, lift us from the ground
of our mediocrity or enable us to live

more comfortably within it.
So we prayed,

before retreating to the movie theater,
our seat near the exit, just in case.

Empire State (2)

You ask me to appreciate what is holy
among the strait-laced high-rises
erected less for our viewing pleasure
than to keep us in line and I draw a blank,
occupied as I am by the more basic task
of purchasing a pair of sturdy shoes
so I can continue my walk
through days and nights
ignoring the strictures and structures
of the horizontal, the vertical,
the inclined, hearing all the while
the warnings of the the priests
who would tether me their
hitching posts and have me
dwell in the blood of the lamb
even as the breath I draw in and release
dispatches me to the greener pastures
my mind continually seeks.

The Marriage of Fact and Fiction

Coming over the bridge

Momma fell into the water.

The rest of us drowned trying to pull her out.

Not one survivor.

No matter, now that all the streets

are glass-strewn and shoes

forbidden on pain of death.

You Were Saying

You weren't feeling well
and so took a stroll
relying on your feedbag of trail mix
for sustenance while wondering
when you might be out of here.
There was freedom in being invisible
to the young and indifferent to those
you're obliged to call contemporaries.
But never mind all that.
The sun was shining.
The moon was destined to appear.
Not everything was over just yet
as you continued your search
for the passageway home.

World

In the moment of awakening
is his dream gone,
the world he was immersed in
not for him to recall
other than it was there
and awaits him again,
its flow ongoing.

Now the known world,
one of bombs and long knives
and conscienceless men
methodically plunging
sharpened blades
into the soft flesh of strangers.
Tasked with death, they must
perform their work with care.

What is this realm
of the triple-locked door,
relying on fear
to place us in its care,
a world that would leave
no room for any other?

The Fall

The day has been one of concern.
That several flight fall
from the flimsy ledge,
the grave force of the perpendicular strike
your feet first landing made
on the concrete below,
the blood from burst vessels rising
to discolor your face,
the scalpel-wielding surgeon
in his green gown only suspending
the countdown to cut time
when the darkness began to recede.

The mad rush gone for good,
in its place the afternoon nap
and slow treks through the park
where you pause to lean against
the fence on Diamond Six
hoping for number 9 to get a hold of one
and clear the outfielder's head
as you used to do.

Withdrawal

With lights turned low
I turn to the radio.
An opera.

Let me be honest,
I don't know which.
I am simply the captive
of its emoting embrace.

The street calls.
Apartment walls bulge,
Neighbors seeking to burst
their bounds.

Trust me, I have heard
the siren's call before
and run to those
with faces hard as doors.

Giving my escape routes a rest,
I am.
Down for the night.
Here is where you will find me,
not that I am asking you to look.

Gretchen

She couldn't say what had happened
as we gawked at the commotion
of police trucks and cruisers
and bullet-proofed officers
across the boulevard.

No body lying covered head to toe
on the pavement.
No one waving a gun or prompted
by the suicide gene to take the plunge.
Did say our friend Lonnie was on the verge again.

Did say she heard him speaking the language
of relapse as I reached into my bag.
Did she want a clock?
Does great tick-tock all through the night.
Be your friend in the lonely hours.

Said she'd take a pass,
Looking like a lost child with her brother
in lockup and her father wandering
in foreign lands. I went on my way
to the thrift shop for a drop off
but she called me back for a proper goodbye.
So I gave her skin and bones a proper hug.

Then darkness came and found me lonesome,
Gretchen nowhere in sight and my clock gone too.
That can happen when you're shedding.

On Reading Knausgaard, volume 5

Blitzkrieg revival

The march of the innocents

The fabulous decor of Woolworth's

Angles on the straight and narrow

The fiduciary element in your skin

The plastic gavel you wield so artfully

Podcast listeners summoned to explain themselves

We had them beaten going into the ninth

Only in Boston is there something
about a corner grocery with steps leading down

Strangers carrying phallic symbols
in bright yellow bags

Forgive them father though they know
Exactly what it is they do

Puce is red for the very last time

Bossa nova time the only time

On Broadway

On Broadway was he dancing
fueled by a sound he alone
with headset-covered ears could hear.
Never full-out bust a move did he go.
Only the hint of what he could do
in those few irregular steps he took,
as had I the night before
in a frenzy of Bee Gees and Beatles,
that recurring urge to be taken
high and higher still,
to leave behind the demands
of a demanding day,
the ego flame burning bright,
turning me and turning me
on the spit of self
while my patient bed could only wait.

This Day

Around the loop
a woman jogged.
A stoic mask she wore
as she sought her perfect weight.

There were leaves on the trees
and the grass was green
and softness held sway in the air.
A man patted his dog.
A mother sang to her child.

It was dusk by now.
We still had time
before the darkness came.

My Brother

I am happy on the bus. Nothing you need
to hear, you say, but it stirs me
to be close to the river and to board
from a new location apart from where the life
of the city is. Wonder is to be seized upon,
held tight to, like love when and if it comes.

The bus of my childhood I never truly took
but it ran even closer to the railroad
by its side than to the river doing its best
To stay abreast, as it knew lonesomeness too.
The bus was yellow and green and savored
its only path. Even today does it wend
its way along that route in my occupied heart.

My brother has a place here too.
He had daring on his breath and in his head
leaping off the dock from which
old men dropped their lines into the sullied
water near where this bus went on its way.
This was no small matter. The river had its
scheme and tried to take my brother down
so it could have him for its own and will
always need an eye on it for how
it can sometimes be.
And yes, you would be within the bounds
of truth to call it capricious treachery.

But he lived, not in the present tense,
not like Jesus lives in the hymn we used to sing.
My brother went on to take a freighter
from the pier not far from the bus
I am now on, downriver from where he leapt
while he still lived as the river still does.

Hinky Dinky Doo

Hinky did not want a love in vain,
though there be some who do
and dare not say it.

His love was of a dangerous kind.
It put his heart, his life at risk.
This he saw traversing the coastline,
the sea monstrous and implacable
in its intentions toward the land
and all who lived upon it.

And yet only with the cover
of the turbulent surf could he whisper
to Beloved so not even the straining stars
could hear. All for the best.

He and Beloved were children
under the big man's suspect auspices,
the big man with his big gun.
You know the one we're talking about.

Coming To

A woman wants to feel safe in the land
of her father, protected from the acquisition
of secrets he would surreptitiously obtain.
Of this Amalfi was made aware
in his street corner chat with Francoise,
who let him know where he stood
by turning her gaze to her new beau.

This was of no consequence.
You must take Amalfi's word for it.
He had vacated the premises
of her earthly power sometime ago
and could listen in a neutral state
to her account of undeserved filial
loyalty in a medical emergency,
her father lying in a hospital bed
with a goitered neck
at the distance she required
to be in the same room with his shifty self.

It was the perfect time of day,
the apocalyptic wail of an ambulance
along the avenue no deterrent
to keen listening and comprehension.
All was good that knowing should have a means
of entry, he said with unwarranted certainty,
and doubled down for emphasis,
then looked both ways before crossing the street.

You Too?

The stars were out.

You saw them too.

Strange configurations in the sky.

All manner of rearrangement.

Taking our cue from above,

we spoke in earnest,

seeking to heal the rift.

How is it we then were parted

anew, seeking accommodation

in venues we had outgrown,

rooms shabby from neglect

where only settling,

never joy, could be found

amid the smell of mold?

No

Always would I see that slow-moving train
from the bed in which I lay in that house
where I was made to stay,
the girls telling their nightly tale
of the railroad crossing
and workers who came
from the caboose to snatch them
from their life and I would
cry out against the crime
that left the girls bereft
of everything and everyone they knew
and loved as I had been taken from what I knew
and loved to be there in that house with them
so long ago in the haze of what had really happened.

I Speak to You from Desert Sands

I thought there
on the rubble-strewn street
how a life could easily fall apart
requiring a person to tuck himself
into the warm spaces he could hope
to find on a cold night and what
it might mean to have destitution
in both the personal and material sphere.
This may seem uncalled for
but emptiness is waiting
to give expression to itself
and much much more
right there in the fullness
of your life as you seek to present it.

Something to Know

She moved in a circle
of those who sang
of lamentation over loss,
hers a remembrance
of kith and kin
gone in gruesome fashion.
There in the planetarium
she chose to linger
among the stars and all
celestial powers
she called on to guide her
in this city whose streets
she now would walk
in daylight hours only.

Breakfast at Tiffany's

Then I was there in a time that had
for a time been my own
with her who even then aroused
my senses as she did these years later
when I could better contemplate
the words holly and go lightly
and the sea change from Lula Mae
and how I missed my brother Ben
as I had no need to when he was still with me,
he more closely connected with "Moon River"
than I could ever be or maybe
it was "Blue Moon" and all it brought
because he had that in his life as well
before it came to the time he had neither.

On Revisiting *Mulholland Drive* in a Time of War

The lights are burning bright
on a Hollywood night
and as we bear witness
to the glitter far below
sadness intrudes that lips meant to kiss
can run so foul of amorousness.
“The end is in sight” not just words spoken
into the ether but coming to fruition,
as if the earth bombed bare
can ever be described as fecund
with anything but corpses.

Excuse Me, Please

That word “love” spoken
into your cell phone faintly
as if anything more would be *de trop*
and elicit embarrassment if not in you
in your intended.

Those four letters rearranged
suggest in French flight or theft.

Though perhaps we don't need
a foreign tongue for guidance here.
The word fear, will that do,
fear that love will lead you
to inhabit only the lonely spaces
when it walks on out the door?

I happened to be behind you as you spoke,
from another time The Beatles singing
as only they could do,
something about love love me do,
finding a way to cheer us
here in the earthly dimension
that is all we truly seem to know.

The Bandshell

It is no small thing to see where you once were,
the plainclothes detective with his flying tackle
driving your thin adolescent frame down to the ground
then hauling you upright for a sendoff
with a hard kick in the seat of your torn trousers,
causing a murmur among the outdoor
concert goers briefly pulled from
the sedating magic of the master
musician's violin but this is what
you get when you
spit a mouthful of fountain water
in your friend Joey's face
and he seeks to pay you back in kind
with a mouthful of his own and so
you overturn the overflowing garbage can
to delay him from his vengeful course.
These incidents not so few
and far between a cutup's song of alienation
from a world you perceived
as not entirely your own.

Where It Is

Cloud formations unrelentingly gray
foretelling the hard rain that fell,
imposing a mood
of gloom, the elements
conspiring to remind me,
as Camus couldn't,
of the real meaning of aloneness,
my mind turning to those years long before
when I would stare from the back of the class
at unapproachable Betty Belson,
lacking, as she didn't, the facility
to read the man in a language
that would never be my own.

Out!

Then I said to God
you must go now.

Really, the time is past due
for your departure.

You are like an old book
I cannot bear to open again,

as appealing as the taste
of wet cardboard in my mouth.

To the restless forest
would I direct you

but the wolves are ravenous
in all the outlying areas.

Take my coat from the rack.
Take it, I say.

I have dollars in my wallet
to dispense to you

should we chance
to meet on city streets.

On Approaching

Through the filter of the bare and unkempt trees
could I see the old buildings
their whiteness taking a stand against
the erosions of time
and fleetingly the face of our president
as if to signify the continuum
he too was caught up in, this loop
of time past and time present
reducing him to the realm of the almost human.
Further came the celebration of dusk,
the buildings growing more alive
above the gaily glowing neon signs,
the candy colors that drew us
in childhood and ruined our young teeth.

Hello There

I was apart from the crowd
and all that surrounded it.
A balloon floated past
and spoke my name.
Scraps of wind-borne paper
did the same.
I settled in, conversing
with the air on an intimate basis.
It was long overdue that we should speak.
I turned to the trees and the grass
and shared my anxious thoughts with them as well.
The radiance of sunlight arose from within,
calling me to it
that I might feel alone no more.

While Out Walking

That perhaps the life you were called to
is not the life you were meant for,
only today thinking a close reading
of the volume of verse you ordered
would bring a share of the poet's talent,
as when you were a child pleading
with your mother for an Irish wool sweater,
white like the one you saw on that
Adonis of a boy at your school,
a garment that would lessen your
overbite and flesh out your meager frame,
aligning you more closely
in looks with him whom you could
only in reality dream of being

On Reading Simenon

I have cast my lot with Maigret.

He is my refuge.

I need no other.

Surely an exaggeration, you say.

Doubtless you are correct.

But I cannot range far and wide forever.

There may come a time

When it is necessary to,

how you say,

Put all zee eggs in one basket.

Then There Was One

The clip includes the madly flapping wings
of those few remaining angels
circling for departure
a stone's throw from starving
insurrectionists and their idled trucks
on fractioned parcels of arid land,
the movement of troops across makeshift borders
having begun as throngs chant
"Because it is clean"
in mockery of the white warrior
baked on desert sands,
a constitution written in invisible ink
accountable for all of it.

I have no call to tell you any of this,
nor does anyone need devices with screens
when there is rumbling underfoot
there for all to feel
in the uncanny way we have
of knowing when the meteorite has struck,
pigs falling through the ripped canvas of the sky
as goats rise from the groaning earth.
Tell me now the rain is not dead
and the heavens have not lost their grip,
the meltdown of mystery no greater than
a popsicle gingerly held meeting a similar fate
in the heat of the noonday sun.

Are You Listening?

The reality of aloneness
having come to him
with the familiar pain
of a phone call not returned
he headed out the door
to feel the wind on his face
and witness the bright lights
pitted against the blackness,
his own voice seeking to disown him
as nothing to the comfort he took
in having his feet on solid ground.

Bare It

And then you realize it cannot hold
this threshold of excitement you had crossed
that your passion for the resurrection

your memory
of your father
your mother
your brother
your sisters

has gone into the steel gray day
some somber ecclesiastical vault
and you are free in your obscurity

to straighten the bedding
water the plants
purchase the potting soil
you have put off buying
when the urgency of expression
was so upon you

because you are going nowhere
and the thoughts that occupy your mind
are as nothing to the silence of the phone
and all that surrounds you

In Time of War

You need to come back.
With a power not his own

he spoke these words,
this man whose life

was not his own.
It did not seem possible,

this coming back,
not in the moment he spoke,

but soon I was on my way
though it would not be

could not be
the same

though maybe
just maybe

it could be
the longing in me said

and I cried out
where is the subway station

that can put me on the path
and a woman with wilted

flowers in her hair
came to assist

and we lightly kissed
but she was emphatic

that war was no time
for love, it too must

be set aside,
while up ahead there was

the promise of a subway station
with a stairway down

and trains and people
and I was running toward it

even as it kept moving.
It just kept moving.

Imagine that.

Over Here

Seeing that I was in her thrall
the rink summoned me, that I might be
under the auspices of the new and witness
the repetitive circles and hard falls
on the unyielding ice. Avatars spoke as I sat,
those who with their stores of knowledge
related history in an authentic mode,
not the fictions of the chroniclers of deceit,
saying do you remember young Cassius Clay
as he then was called, sent to the canvas
by the southpaw Brit Henry Cooper's 'ammer
only to rise again.

Are you listening, lover in vain?

I repeat, are you listening?

After the Game

The stars struck at night this time
not those celestially positioned
but the ones in prominent positions here on Earth,
Bidenby and others of his ilk pronouncing
the humanities the province of losers lacking
the infrastructure of mind that could bear
the weight of quantum physics and molecular biology
and ride the iron rails of higher mathematics into infinity.
But it was no matter. My limitation made clear,
I began my power walk to elevate
above the reductionism of their words.
I said hello to the dark streets and those
consigned to dwell in them, seeking that zone
where no restriction on love dare enter.

Fall Back, Baby

You tell me I should fly to the moon,
involve myself in planetary dysfunction
build sandcastles in smog-free air
disseminate the truth through abstruse filters
designed to create misunderstanding.
You say I should imprint the word “lonely”
on my chest and eat sauerkraut for breakfast.
These things you posit as a design for living
and certify as occupying the realm
of the categorically verifiable
without so much as a word about yourself.
I will see you in the night with the dogs of ruin.
I will glisten with sweat witnessing your demise
and read no psalm either before or after.

Light Lit

I leaned toward love from the very beginning.
It was my mother I have to believe,
The pilot light lit
there in the amniotic fluid of her womb
that endless softness
in which to seek refuge
when the cold wetness of my pee
drove me in the night from my bed to hers.
Morning was the price I paid, as I awoke
to my father staring down at me
In all his hairy reality,
His forearm an iron bar across my thin chest
as if I now must pay and pay forever
for my intrusion into his domain.

Speak

I asked Caravaggio if I might speak
with him as to where he had been and where
he since has gone. He directed me
across the park that I might witness
denuded trees and cars immolating
of their own volition. Of space
and perspective and the language
of color he had nothing to say,
and when informed that his name was spoken
by a potential lover's lips,
he merely turned his back and walked away.

Songs of the current time were loud in my mind
as I struggled among ruins.
Voices called to me of the shivering forlorn,
the starkly naked piled against
useless ramparts. A horse ran wild
hither and yon, bewildered as to its identity.
All had come undone in one form or another.
Only the rats had kept their cool,
recognizing a Johnny come lately
trying to crash their scene.

Fortunes are won and lost on the bed of solemnity,
a voice called out, but didn't stop there.
Strangers are those whose identities
you have stripped and stolen.
Causal connections are a figment of your melted mind.
Go ahead, get lost. We won't find you.
Such were the headwinds of abuse I and others
encountered, even the air continuing to vanish
after promising it wouldn't.

Hunger

From the life
you have failed to live
come flashes of memory,
shards from the past
chased by a gnawing hunger
calling attention to itself
like a clamoring infant.

You've never fought through it,
not like Knut Hamsun,
never entered into
its province of despair
to ask what in its heart

of hearts it wants of you
in order to awaken.

Luther Lutherina

Enveloped in the warmth of an early
 spring day, an unearthly feeling of love
 possessed him seeing the indigent,
 his tush on the hard concrete while
 reading Stephen King, Luther roundly
 rejecting the rebuking voice
 for stuffing the donation can
 there at Lost Soul's feet
 and battle-tested to stay embraced
 in his love song there in the subway
 as Hefty bag man screamed his pain
 at all those perceived as a threat
 to his super bad self.

Because he was who he was,
 mostly sound of mind if not of body,
 Luther showed for his appointment
 with the *renowned* Dr. Raftanjani,
 cardiologist to the stars and the lowly
 and all who fall in between.

Arrhythmia.

Left atrial enlargement.

Aortic root dilation.

Luther listened and showed no fear,
 holding in check any antisocial
 impediments with his usual mask of docility.

He wasn't liking him, Dr. Rastanjani.

That wasn't quite it. He *was* afraid.

The doctor like a powerful engine,
 pulsing with energy.

Power with its way of attracting as well
 as repulsing. Serials murderers.

Luther a sucker for them.

Spent a whole day in bed reading
 a book about one, also a doctor.

All my life I have been afraid,
 he confessed to the six-sided tiles of Riverside Park
 that afternoon, before retrieving
 the elegant word *hexagonal*,
 and before morphing into Lutherina
 going toe to toe with Sister Bushwah

on her first day of dorm life,
Bushwah having sought to punk her,
Lutherina saying motherfuck your noise
and all your eponymous bushwah,
you freaking fear addict.
Be seeing you alone.
Be stripping you down
to the biz
of making you really real.
Crazy is as crazy does.

Altogether rejoicing at the places
on the journey his head took him to.
Just happy to be alive,
his breath on his side.
Oh yeah. Oh yeah.

Go Now

I was hungry. Not Knut Hamsun hunger.
Not sleeping in the rain and dreaming in the rain hunger.
Just evening hunger. The kind you get
when you've had lunch but not dinner
and you're far from where the bombs are falling
and scarcity is a permanent fact of life
reducing you to eating grass
and the bark off trees and delirium
soon comes calling.

I knew a man named Knute—Knute with an e
as you can see. He came with serious avoirdupois.
We're not supposed to talk like this.
Truth can draw the law on you,
weigh you down with slander charges.

I'm at a bus stop now where just last week
a hawk swooped down and nabbed a rat
for its evening nosh. Shutterbugs encircled
the tree where the bird tore at its fare,
giving no mind to a minimum of manners,
the dinner hour being at hand and we all
having to do what we all have to do.

A Question or Two, If You Please

Suppose I was freed
from giving so much weight
to the tyranny
of your scalding words?
Suppose I could scatter them
like so many ashes
as to a whooshing desert wind,
and all I held before me
was the ceaseless beauty
of your ever present face?

Truth

I didn't like you.

I told the world an untruth
in saying that I did.

Seeking a defense
against my own mind

I call on the power
of the universe to intercede,
here on land and beyond
the water's edge.

Sprint

As the ocean coiled to strike.
the light of your love was not to be found.
I went down to the water,
down where nakedness lived,
and spoke to the crashing waves
in a language not their own.

A stranger announced the fruit of his loins
was close at hand and were the measure
of his manhood, saying that when
the infants cried their tears
were solely for his amusement.
His bare feet disturbed me,
as did his animal glare at the future
for not arriving soon enough.

I began a sprint for my freedom,
trying to find it where I could.

Recipe

Bring your language to a boil
on an open fire.

Ring your words with chestnuts.

Crown them with kale

that they may have

the nutrients they deserve.

Go easy on the oil and vinegar.

Remember what is really meant

by slippery when wet.

The Fort

White, with crenellated towers.
The rest is gone to me,
save its power of attraction.

The store was always closed when I stopped by,
leaving me to see my love through clouded glass.
That window and locked door.
I was not a burglar of that order,
unable to pass through barriers
of that kind, not right there on Broadway.

In this moment would I seek
to give birth to who I was.
In this moment would I seek to care
even as I am buried alive
beneath my own waste.

The sun was in me as a child.
In my blond hair,
my radiating smile.
There were times of rage as well.
My brother, were he here, would testify to that.

If I could, I would tell you this more clearly.
Too many the aborted missions.

I needed a fort for my dream of heaven.

A friend who later perished from the earth
lived nearby. So too did my older sisters
and that brother take their leave, say adios.

Gone, gone, forsaken by themselves
if not by me.

You ask me did I love them? That is a question
I do not have to answer, not when posed
by the likes of you.

That friend, born of an Estonian mother
and GI Joe Black father, lived not so far
from the fort but had no hunger

for it that I know.

His sister walking the streets by age fourteen,
he dead of gangrene
in a Bowery flop some years ago.

Even as a child I was filled with unspoken desire
for this sister of my friend
but never for my own.

I pronounce you man and strife.
I pronounce you dead in life.

These are not instances of truth but the truth—
Dead dead dead.

A feckless wilderness it was
feckless in everything but
the impulse art of murder
baseball bats swung to the skull
by men bred for savagery
below my friend's window,

he calling to me
in the night to help with
his head
his heart
his great unknowns.

I was poor in spirit,
an urchin in torn jeans
with my own witnessing to do.

The slit and blood-spurting neck
of a hunky man brought down
to the ground
to bleed out on the concrete
where he had collapsed,
gurgling on his path to expiration.
Did I lack cause for a fort
behind whose walls vigilance
would count for something,

the ramparts manned all through
the night and in daylight hours?

Facts of a certain kind the world walks on by
with disdain and haughtiness in its vengeful gait.

The democratic impulses
of Broadway are not
a consideration here.

That fort was not for everyone,
It just had a mind to claim me for its own
and keep me for my maker.

Sister of Mine

Ruth (may I be so personal as to use your name?
 For years and for a fictional purpose, I called
 you Rachel, though no one labored for your hand).
 You were the elusive one, the one always leaving
 as I entered the room, “bye” a kind of bullet
 to the chest, as if you could love God and not people.
 What was it to spend your life that way, your signature
 expression a smirk and every word with a razor attached?
 What was it to live life as a blister? Was it not lonely?

I have no big attachment to you, SRO death woman,
 you who were age twelve when I entered the world.
 (Was it true you had to be kept from me as an infant?
 I’m told you did things, that you had a torturing intent.)

Your floor a choppy sea of books.
 How did you live with such disorder?
 Did it reflect your state of mind?
 Your treasure you cradled against your chest.
 Only they with access to your heart.

Vassar College took you in.
 Imagine that, a sister out there in the world,
 beyond the reach of the fire breathers
 at the downtown church. The tunnel
 where I played a pathway to you,
 somewhere to the north, the freights rumbling through
 Conveying me along the river into that privileged
 world of light. Ruth, you were a beacon.
 You had escaped the Pentecostal admonitions
 against life, the flames of hell burning hotter
 than gasoline. You would have nothing to do
 with the gnashing of teeth. You would not
 be slain by the word worldly from the mouths
 of your accusers, those who slapped the gilt-
 edged pages of their Bibles as they fulminated,
 indulging in the sad rituals of superstition-
 saddled children. I had heard your
 worldliness from childhood and thrilled to it.
 All my life I have loved the sound of women singing,
 as you sang “Hard-Hearted Hannah” and
 “I’m Going to Wash That Man Right out of My Hair”

and all the Broadway show tunes you sought to master.

Saying, "What do you want to be when you grow up?"
 "A skin diver," my fumbling answer came. "Aren't all men
 skin divers?" you replied, shaming me with your smirking truth.

The living room you said that in. Linoleum in place of a carpet.
 A bed made into a sofa. Lemon cake, moist and tart, from
 Party Cake. Birthdays recorded in black and white.

What happened, Ruth? What ailed you, as Mother would say?
 What prompted you, home from college in your freshman year,
 to push her backward into the Christmas tree as she rushed
 to greet you at the door? Broken ornaments, crushed gifts,
 father streaking to the scene with raised hand an annihilating
 instrument and you fleeing out the door before he could
 wreak vengeance on your pale flesh. Were you seeking
 to punish her for the crime of letting you go?
 (Would it please you to know I cried that evening,
 and pledged to be as good for Mother as you were bad?)
 And why did you leave college only days before your
 graduation? Was it your debilitating pride that took you
 away, your failure to graduate with honors, the men who
 didn't want you while claiming others for their 1950s own?

You were seen crying in the lobby in this period,
 there in Mother's arms.
 The floodgates had opened on your terrible pain.
 A man had shown an interest and then had left you.
 For that moment you allowed her close,
 allowed human contact and human touch.
 You were within the fold, if only temporarily.

Then you were gone again. You adopted a new pose.
 The braid replaced with a provocative duck's ass.
 Your hennaed hair seemed to grow fins sharp
 to the touch. Hair to express your mocking stance.
 Dark sunglasses, I can see you but you can't see me,
 A kind of facial armor. Weaponized, you wrapped
 yourself in a purple full-length coat, a staple
 of your dress in summer heat as well as winter cold.

Whatever, you were alone,
 on the street,
 in that room,
 in your life.

You got jobs and left jobs. I heard the name CBS
 and my heart lifted. I saw you connected to the glories
 of television and the world. I was proud of you, Ruth.
 You provided hope. But then you quit. Someone said
 It was your boss and the torment it brought to be near him.
 Lesser jobs followed, about which you did not speak.

You lived your life in hotels for transients. You ate
 standing up at hot dog stands. Five-minute meals in
 midtown amid strangers with unclean hands running
 paper napkins across their greasy mouths. You broke
 The seal on your daily bottle and drank in your room.
 The world perplexed you. It had no place for your pain.
 When you had drunk enough it turned you toward home.
 You flew into the apartment shrieking at Mother
 only to collapse in her arms. Your ritual act of the night,
 and when you needed something more, you ran drunk
 and naked down Broadway shouting your love
 for John F. Kennedy only to pass out between parked cars.

Bellevue. Manhattan State. Rockland State. Institutions such as
 these, with their numbing drugs and trespassing staffs,
 became your home away from home. Then Father died.
 His passing transformational. A psychic mystery.
 No more the bottle. The sunglasses flew off, as did the coat.
 Your hair returned to its sandy color.
 Now in your mid-twenties, you were without a means of support.
 Mother took you in, gave you back your room.
 The sea of books gone now. Only the one book. The good book,
 The wandering tribes, the stiff-necked people. You were there
 with the Canaanites and the Hittites and the Ishmaelites.
 The stern-voiced prophets bound you to their truth
 before you entered the Jesus terrain of the Gospels
 and wandered the streets in shapeless dresses
 from the Goodwill bag and gunboat sneakers.
 Your face scrubbed clean of war paint. You had let go
 of the world, not needing to ask if it had let go of you,
 and became a fixture at the Chock Full O' Nuts

at One Hundred Sixteenth and Broadway
 here you sat in the early afternoon having
 your first food of the day. Do you remember,
 you with your powdered doughnuts and a mug
 of heavenly coffee in a space to share with others
 beyond your single room, though by then you had found
 The space within where you could dwell.
 There was found your great reality.
 On Sundays you returned to the Pentecostal
 Tabernacle from which in your youth you had drifted.
 The pastor at the pulpit slapping his open bible,
 the church falling down around him,
 and the diminished congregation.
 Your nights were spoken for.
 Scanning the dark sky for signs of Jesus.
 You wanted to be ready when he came.
 You knew he had eyes only for you.
 God as the extreme purgative,
 the relentless application of Him to your life.

The emergency room appearances.
 Rat poison burning a hole in your stomach.
 And there were the taps in Mother's apartment
 You turned on but never off, the journeys
 out onto the window ledge,
 Believing you had heard your Lord,
 calling, calling, in the rushing wind
 over Manhattan. When the authorities came
 and took you away for another hospital stay,
 Mother held your college mug and spoke
 of your fine mind and all your promise
 and wondered where it was she had gone wrong.
 "All day as a child she would follow me around
 from room to room, Stand behind me without
 so much as a word. What was I to do?"

Toward the end placing your hands
 around her neck in a not so friendly
 fashion, Mother saying,
 "I cannot have this. I cannot have this at all."

Ruth, your absence from Mother's burial
 did not concern me greatly.

Had I given my consent for you
to take the pills that left you comatose
on the floor of your plain room?
Did I know that without her you were done?
In the ambulance, my indifference
to the paramedics trying to work their
their medical magic and bring you back,
you who had chosen life in death
to death in life. You went, Ruth, you went.
You flew past the IVs
and the scanners. You took your leave
from Ward Six and Dr. Alberstrom
and his white-garbed flock of protégés.
You laughed at holding on when
all you wanted was to let go.
You got to say your final bye so loud and clear.

Let's say you're in a room and I am with you. Let's say
we've closed the door and now are sitting for a while.
Let's say that.

June 2004

Old Man Walking

I walked with my cane in the rain
and stopped in at Trader Joe's for blueberries.
That's right. The old coming in from the cold
for a communal sense. Even if you're not
sitting down to a meal with folks,
you are all together buying
the provisions for one.

A man called to me, a big man
with provisions for his wife and son.
I talked some baseball talk with him.
The Mets comeback win last night.
I kind of felt he liked me and it warmed
my heart that he could cross an ocean
of difference to arrive there.

Then I was on my way, doing my steps,
the way I do every day, my health app
monitoring my movement.
Because it's important to do your steps.
Motion is lotion, I hear it said.

"Yes indeed, David," I said to myself
back home. I say that a lot, "yes indeed"
and stuff like "Would you like to watch
a movie, little David,?" And little David
replies "I would. I really, really would,"
The way a child can when he is really
excited and grateful for a gift bestowed.

Watched a movie called *High Sierra*,
with Humphrey Bogart. Roy Earle his name.
Always hitching up his pants, this Roy Earle,
as if he had never heard of suspenders
or was too vain to wear them.

It's funny about old movies.
you can have a complete aversion to watching one
because it takes you to a time that no longer is
and all the actors are dead and it's like you've
entered some kind of creepy realm
and something comes over you and you say

no, no, I want to be among the living

like that time you visited your Aunt Tillie
at the nursing home and found her among
the others wheelchair-bound in the dining hall
zonked on meds she and all of them were fed
ignoring the hot dog and boiled potato
on her plate, and soon you are fleeing
into the street desperate to be among
the young you are no longer a part of
because the dead and dying are not for you
not yet, not for this one night, not here,
not in America, home of the young.

You

I didn't much care that Alison, my ex,
had met her dream guy
and he was buff and flush,
that they now were riding the glory train.
I was in pain and in full retreat
on the rain-swept dirty streets,
recoiling at the faux gay laughter
of the mindless ones
showing off their Hollywood teeth.
Then, when I thought it never would,
the pain broke—it broke, I say—
and you appeared, calling out
“Life after death,”
en route to wherever you were headed.

Cook

Fine-tune your language,
the frothy fare you offer.
Let your words sit on an open fire.
Ring them with chestnuts and spinach
And all the nutrients they require.
Garlic-gird them to keep at bay
demons with insatiable appetites.
Go easy on the oil and vinegar
remembering what is really meant
by slippery when wet.
The solid credentials of the opiate-mellowed
moon and its celestial cohort must be
kept in mind as you proceed.
Sincerity is not the hallmark of fools
but the portal for genuine knowledge.
Now shake that skillet and shake it good.

The Ceaseless Rain

There was that time in Seattle.
A bench under a tall tree.
Across the street a desolate house
smelling of poverty.
On the front porch
a poet with a broken front
tooth drawing cheap wine
through a straw
from the hollow of his guitar.
Some things you must walk
about to experience
but sit still in order to see.

Sugar Sugar

He said we should go with him
but we resisted,
wedded as he was to his own poverty.
We told him we would travel on our own
seeing the grayness of his skin
and sniffing grievance behind the mask.
and so we said go away from us now
that we may walk free
in the garden we have made.
Go away from us now that we may see
a vision other than your own.
Go away from us now. Just go away.