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## Long Hot Bath

Only the last three letters  
of the vacancy sign are lit up.  
The street is wide, cars parked at angles;  
a rail line runs a block over,  
past a grain elevator and loading ramps.  
It's raining. The night clerk tells us  
the hotel is full. He apologizes,  
as if he's caused the storm.  
Having crossed the Mississippi  
two nights before, I've lost track  
of what State we're in.  
We turn towards the door,  
and the clerk adds: *There is one room.*  
He pauses. *It's not the best.*  
A raw kid, maybe just out of high school,  
he's got a long neck and an adam's apple  
that won't keep still.  
*What's wrong with it?* I ask.  
*Nothing*, he hesitates. *It's just the bed--  
a Murphy bed--  
last one in the county, far as we can tell.*  
The name rings a bell,  
but it takes me a few seconds.  
*I could give you a discount*, he adds.

*(Continued)*

*(No stanza break)*

Jenny's wet from the rain, and impatient  
to get out of her clothes.

*The kind of bed, I ask,  
that folds down from the wall?*

He nods; gives an uncomfortable smile.

I turn to Jenny: *Ever since I was a kid,*

*I've wanted to try one of those beds--*

*pull it down from the wall,*

*climb in under the covers,*

*and see if it flips me back up*

*as soon as I get comfortable.*

Now she's giving me a look.

Standing by the window,

arms wrapped around herself,

all she wants to do

is take a long hot bath.

## Reading

I've always found poetry readings  
to be dreadful affairs--  
maybe it's the kind of people poets are,  
wanting you to pay attention  
but not willing to do much more  
than write poems about themselves.  
Like funerals, hardly anyone goes to readings,  
except family and friends--  
something's missing.  
As far as I'm concerned,  
poetry needs more sex and violence,  
and humor--most of all.  
The last time I went to a reading,  
because I had to,  
it was at an art gallery.  
I spent most of the time  
lost in a painting on the wall--  
not a very good painting,  
the angles were off, unintentionally,  
and the shapes out of proportion,  
but there was something alluring  
about the nude sitting in a chair  
reading a book,  
her legs hanging over an armrest,  
one foot pointing at me, the other  
toward the floor. I thought the painter  
had a way to go, but he'd caught something  
that made the woman seem relaxed,  
as if, in real life, she wouldn't mind at all  
sitting there, naked and reading,  
in a gallery full of people half asleep  
during a poetry reading.

## Sunday Morning At The Metropolitan With My Son

Some fathers take their sons  
to baseball games or church.  
In the Egyptian wing,  
you point out mummies  
small as children;  
the painted sarcophagus  
of an old woman thick with makeup,  
still frightening in her determination.  
A scroll of papyrus leads you  
the length of a room,  
as if you know what you're reading.  
Before bird reliefs in stone,  
you say the blue feathers  
spread like the turquoise necklace  
at the Queen's throat.  
You lead me sideways  
through narrow tomb corridors,  
surrounded by hieroglyphics.  
To let us pass,  
strangers flatten themselves  
against clear plastic walls,  
and whisper appropriately.  
This was all sacred once,  
in a different way.

**Requiem For John Fahey**  
*American Primitive*  
(1939-2001)

The one time I saw him,  
at St. Peter's on West Fourth Street,  
he carried a six-pack of coca-cola onstage  
and proceeded to drink every can  
during a two hour concert.  
He fingerpicked "Bicycle Built for Two"  
and made it sound like Mozart's  
Clarinet Quintet, ragged.  
All that sugar couldn't be good for him,  
I remember thinking; it meant some kind  
of nervousness, playing on the rush.  
And he had this preoccupation with death,  
always writing requia,  
for people like Russell Blaine Cooper,  
Mississippi John Hurt,  
even ex-lovers, still alive.  
He'd make records on his own,  
calling them *The Dance of Death*,  
and *Death Chants and Breakdowns*.  
The first one, *Blind Joe Death*,  
he sold from the trunk of his car  
at the gas station where he worked.  
He never became well known,  
and eventually stopped performing.  
I forgot about him, though I kept the records  
in a box in the attic.

*(Continued)*

*(No stanza break.)*

Years later, a newspaper article  
said he'd been rediscovered.  
Like Skip James and Bukka White,  
two bluesmen from the twenties  
whose careers he'd resurrected,  
someone had found him and coaxed him  
out of the room he'd been holed up in  
for over a decade.  
He'd developed diabetes and Epstein-Barr,  
and had been living in a men's shelter,  
a welfare motel, in Salem, Oregon.  
It was near the end,  
but he began recording again,  
still naming songs for railroads  
and obscure rivers,  
though after all the years of drinking,  
and bad relationships,  
the original confidence didn't come back.  
There was no more talk of death.  
You could tell he was desperate  
when he repudiated his early recordings,  
all those tunes based on blues and spirituals  
that put him on a level with Ives and Ellington.  
He ranted about how people had to  
leave the past and live in the present,  
and said his best work was just ahead of him.



## Baltimore

This is more than I could ask for,  
this quiet by the water  
in the dark off the inner harbor.  
Across the channel,  
ten o'clock on a hot July night,  
a ship loads, the *Hanjin*,  
spotlights illuminating  
cargo holds and derricks.  
Side by side on a bench,  
we don't talk much,  
just point out the heavy  
tar smell of the pier,  
the reassuring hum  
of a small boat passing,  
its running lights off,  
how the black water sparkles  
with reflections of exploding rockets,  
the dull thud in the distance,  
from a neighborhood,  
to get a jump on the Fourth,  
declaring independence.  
Kids swim off a pier nearby.  
We can't see them; only hear the splashes  
when they jump in; their voices  
calling to each other in Spanish.

### After New York City

There are bats in the attic,  
the roof has been known to leak.  
The groundhog's dug a hole beneath the garden fence—  
rows of beans, lettuce, and zucchini  
that took weeks to grow,  
reduced in a morning to chewed-up, broken stalks.  
I know they'll grow back;  
it's early in the season,  
but the groundhog knows too,  
and has already made his plans.  
Looking for conversation, my neighbor waves  
from the road beside his mailbox.  
To avoid his talk of weather and gossip,  
his complaints of the new mailman  
who delivers to the wrong addresses,  
I pretend to be busy.  
If I believed in sin, this would be one.  
After New York City, patience was the first to go.  
I came here to be alone, not be bothered,  
and am not in the mood for fixing things.  
There's a letter to be written to someone I miss;  
the meditation of mowing the back pasture;  
another night packed with stars;  
and a few John Coltrane solos  
that have said it all.

### Poem With A Line Given To Me By A Friend

He married a good woman  
fairly late in life  
and it did the trick,  
stemmed the tide  
of despondent letters to  
colleagues in San Diego,  
changed his life, he claimed,  
to color from black and white,  
no more talk about the lack  
of confidence and the belief  
he'd never write again.  
The first time they met  
She'd been wearing a raincoat over her slip;  
had come downstairs to put out the trash,  
forgot her keys and stopped in for coffee  
to get out of the rain, and look for a phone.  
-- He'd been sitting at a tiny round table,  
the size of a beer tray, near the window,  
reading a book on Madame Blavatsky.  
*That's an ugly name*, she couldn't help saying--  
it slipped out before she knew.  
He wanted to reach over and touch her knee;  
it was bare and so close to him.

**The Cosmonaut' s Wife**  
*A Letter*

Winter hung on too long  
(could you tell from where you are?)  
and gave up only a few days ago  
when the robins came back.  
I went to visit your father in Evensk  
--he's better and sends his love--  
and came home by bus along the Omolon.  
This morning,  
the first real warm day since September,  
I looked out the window  
and could see no tufts of snow  
bunched stubbornly beneath the trees,  
In those corners of the pasture  
that get little sunlight.  
Each day as you go by, I wave,  
though I know you can't see me.  
Behind the house, a bluebird  
picks at the frayed end of the clothesline,  
tearing off pieces to build its nest.  
I miss you. With the sound you love  
like the tumblers of the universe  
clicking into place,  
thunder rumbles over the mountains  
near Omsukchan.

**Apurimac**  
*(The Peruvian Andes)*

Tusk of moon,  
ivory sliver.  
No one has spoken for hours.  
This is the height  
where the match won't light,  
where the stone house sticks  
like a knuckle from the rock.

Those around me still awake  
on this heatless bus,  
stare through their breath  
at the snow-ring collar  
of a nearby volcano.  
The rest, under fedoras,  
sleep in warm ponchos.

In the coastal desert,  
I stocked up at noon  
on tropical fruit  
and ice-cold drinks,  
no use to me now.  
We're still climbing  
long after midnight.

Before dark, I counted wrecks--  
four cars, one truck, two buses,  
rusted and contorted  
wedged deep in the bottoms of gorges.  
Beneath his Stetson,  
the driver's profile  
sucks hard at his cigar,  
to keep it glowing in the dark.

*(Continued)*

*(Continued from previous page. Stanza break.)*

Two wheels off the edge,  
passing everything  
up ahead,  
he muscles us around  
another switchback,  
another hairpin curve, stopping  
at the most desolate places.

Those who step off  
into this planetary landscape,  
carry flashlights and baskets,  
and disappear over the side  
like spiders,  
only to show up  
illuminated  
miles below.

## Lorca

The only one to notice  
the dew forming on the grass,  
he would have liked another cigarette  
from the men who took him out that night.  
He wanted to listen more  
to the voice, distant but clear,  
of the farmer at the bottom of the valley,  
talking to his goats, one by one  
calling them by name.  
He wished he could paint  
the expressions of these men,  
a few he knew by sight,  
no lights in their eyes,  
their complete indifference.  
He would have liked to dance,  
for the first time, with a certain girl,  
to know the feel,  
and have her take him home  
to watch her remove her skirt,  
both of them slightly drunk  
and in an excellent mood.  
He wanted to write,  
on the piece of paper in his pocket,  
something about the need  
for less realism,  
less attachment to this world,  
but they'd taken his pencil,  
and he didn't want to make them nervous;  
it might cut short his time.

## My Father Watching the Yankees

Lights out, hot summer night,  
rugs rolled up so the floors creak  
when he walks on them,  
he sits alone wearing pajamas  
in the living room--  
a handkerchief around his neck  
to soak up sweat.  
I know he's drinking beer  
from a long V-shaped glass,  
and smoking a cigar,  
his legs crossed in the director's chair.  
When an argument  
at the plate breaks out,  
I can picture him  
sitting up straight,  
leaning forward,  
as the manager steps  
from the dugout  
and heads for home.  
*Here comes Casey,*  
my father says out loud,  
as if someone in the house  
is listening.  
I stay up in my room,  
one small lamp on,  
building models at my desk.  
The glue on my fingertips  
sticks to everything.



### A Story About Love

I'm trying to teach the class a story about love;  
how it sneaks up on two people  
who meet in a Russian resort,  
each married to someone else.  
The woman has a dog; the man  
is a practiced philanderer.  
But the story takes place  
over a hundred years ago,  
in a foreign country,  
and the students don't relate  
to people who can't get divorced,  
like the parents  
of more than half the class.  
What with movies and TV,  
the students feel so worldly  
few of them read,  
and Chekhov really bores them.  
*He's just looking to have a good time,*  
one student who fancies himself  
a ladies' man, sums up the story.  
A girl with a tattooed rose on her shoulder says,  
*They wore too many clothes back then,*  
as if that's why the couple took so long  
to realize they were in love.  
Another, too sophisticated to believe in love at all,  
explains, *It 's just lust. It's always just lust.*  
She's recently turned nineteen,  
and I wonder what's caused her  
to become so cynical.

*(Continued)*

(no stanza break)

I'm just about to lose them  
when the shy girl in back,  
the one who never talks,  
raises her hand to tell us about her cousin  
who lives in the country,  
and whose family is so religious  
they don't even have a television.  
At twenty, she's never been on a date unchaperoned,  
and still hasn't kissed her boyfriend of two years.  
But every Sunday during service,  
as if she has to go to the bathroom  
she sneaks downstairs in church  
to meet her older, married lover.  
And while the congregation is singing  
"Bringing in the Sheaves,"  
the two make love *so passionate it's almost violent*.  
And now the whole class is nodding,  
looking at me as if it's obvious,  
and I'm the one  
who's been missing the point.

**Watching *Pericles* In The Open Air**

Spotlights washed out  
by a sun too hot  
to start this summer evening,  
the blue silk waves carry me  
away from vague dissatisfaction.  
Ignoring the wooden slats  
of the folding seat  
eating into my legs and back,  
and lured by the trance of color,  
movement on the stage,  
the voices' rise and fall,  
I become motionless, dumb, rapt,  
absorbed as a child,  
and forget where I am,  
until conscious of the transformation  
to complete night,  
I look up—  
it's dark  
and only a few stars are out.

### After Whitman

When I heard the prize-winning physicist,  
an authority on Chaos,  
read from his book on Fractals,  
the ground-floor room was full and silent.  
Yet, I became distracted by the fountain  
just outside the window--  
how the pattern of spray  
changed ever so slightly;  
the result of an imperceptible breeze.  
Two women, maybe tourists,  
approached to take photographs.  
One stood with her back to the water  
and smiled, while the other snapped the picture.  
Then they changed places--  
the first one held the camera,  
and the second woman posed.

## Physics

The room is full for  
the authority on Chaos  
who reads from his latest work on fractals,  
I'm distracted by the fountain  
outside the window--  
how the pattern of spray  
changes ever so slightly;  
the result of an imperceptible breeze.  
Two women, maybe tourists  
approach to take photographs.  
One stands with her back to the water  
and smiles, while the other snaps the picture.  
Then they change places--  
the first woman takes the camera,  
and the second one poses.

## Packard

Alone, four years old,  
in the back seat  
of a '52 Packard--  
the windows closed.  
Waiting for mom in the parking lot;  
the backs of my bare legs  
scratched by the rough upholstery.  
For all I know, this is before air conditioning,  
before Novocaine,  
before any idea it can get better.  
I'm content in 95 degrees  
to be alone and watch the sun  
melt and blur at the edges;  
to be wherever they leave me.  
I've no questions--  
people like me;  
it all makes sense.

## The Writing on the Moon

Again, I decide to leave  
the laundry on the line  
until morning.  
Behind the house,  
the full moon rises  
slowly, white as soap,  
and so huge  
for the first time  
I can see the writing  
on its face—letters so faint,  
as if worn from rubbing,  
they seem like an ancient language,  
Persian or Sanskrit,  
and I can't decipher a thing.  
I want to tell someone,  
but they've all moved so far away  
they can't see this.

## Heatwave Beatification

It's been humid for so many days now  
the covers of the paperback books  
on the table tops and counters  
have curled up at the edges.  
At first I thought  
it was the cheap paper,  
which might be true,  
but in the end I know  
it's the heat.  
Half the time, a legionnaire  
separated from my desert patrol,  
I drag myself from one sink oasis  
to another, chugging glass after glass of water.  
By late afternoon, I feel  
like the neighbor's cat  
at the side of the road,  
flattened yesterday by a pickup.  
I can't sleep right  
and try to move as little as possible,  
lying in bed dazed by the heat  
and visions of violent rainstorms,  
the trees around the house  
split and shattered by lightning.  
At one point, I have to go out  
to pull the tarp over the pool  
where it's been blown off.  
Dancing like a tenderfoot across the lawn,  
I dodge lightning strikes,  
as if someone's shooting at my feet  
with sixguns--  
till I become illuminated  
like a saint in a painting  
with a halo.



**The World Tilts Toward April***( For R. B. )*

Driving down the interstate  
in the wrong direction,  
Baltimore behind,  
Eternity up ahead--  
no one comes near me.  
I'm on holy fire;  
the top of my game.  
Cars move aside, obligingly;  
astonished faces behind closed windows;  
heads shaking at my steering-wheel dance.  
Nothing's personal;  
tomorrow will be different,  
but right now the music's too loud,  
and I can't be touched.  
Blessed be the spirit  
waiting for this season to change;  
for this desolate mud  
and these stubble fields  
to break out in color  
like a birthright.

## **Go Out To The Woods And Scream**

Choose your topic, whatever's on your mind,  
take your time--  
or don't even think about it.  
Drive there if you have to;  
park the car and walk a long way.  
When you find the right spot,  
you'll know it.  
Take your clothes off,  
it'll help, especially if it's winter.  
Then lie down like a dog or a horse  
and roll around for awhile,  
making sure you get good and dirty.  
Once you've accustomed yourself to the dark,  
because you're doing this at night,  
stand up and start screaming.  
See how long you last,  
before you scream yourself hoarse  
or pass out from exhaustion.

## Mother

Thanks for thirty years  
of bad advice,  
for believing I would have made  
a good accountant,  
for urging me to become a priest,  
despite my tendency  
to fall in love with women,  
indiscriminately,  
for never standing up  
when he beat me till he stopped  
only because his hands hurt--  
for never standing up for yourself.  
Thanks for dressing me in khaki pants  
and banlon shirts, and for those forced crewcuts,  
so that in all of those photos,  
before I was old enough to resist,  
I look like a Republican golfer.  
Thanks for letting the family  
stick you in a nursing home  
without anyone asking my opinion.  
Thanks for that expression when I visit,  
as if you have no idea who I am,  
though in everything else  
your memory is unimpaired.  
Thanks for only being able to see  
who you wanted me to be,  
and for missing the point.  
I'm not supposed to  
hold this against you-  
but I do.

**The Public Wringing Of The Heart**  
*(Ars Poetica)*

I never believed in Confession--  
the priest ate up my lies,  
the way he thought I ate up his.  
Penance was an excuse  
to watch the candle flames waver;  
to examine the Virgin's eyes  
while she continued to gaze away.  
Early on, I learned to keep  
the spilling of the gut  
to myself--  
despite the media attention,  
it was nobody's business.  
At most, others are simply  
glad they're not you.  
Maybe you feel better  
once you've gotten it  
all off your chest,  
after you've given away  
the last vicarious thrill,  
but the public wringing  
of the heart  
is best saved for big-time problems--  
politicians or preachers  
caught with hookers.

## The Temptation of Saint Anthony

*Sassetta*

The gold of his halo  
tarnished after so many centuries,  
he moves slowly, almost home,  
in a worn brown robe,  
through a desolate landscape  
meant to represent how much  
of this world he has given up.  
Nearly abstract, mud hills  
swirl around him,  
their few trees scraggly and barren.  
His monastic cell,  
a narrow one-room house,  
flamingo pink, featureless,  
with no door, and dark inside,  
looks out-of-place,  
like a phone booth in the desert,  
built for standing room only.  
Blocking his path,  
a grey rabbit, symbolizing,  
I suppose, temptation,  
the devil in some harmless disguise,  
crouches, glaring at him.  
Almost as an afterthought,  
the saint holds up one tired hand  
and blesses the creature,  
to get it out of the way.  
In the arched sky,  
streaked clouds shape themselves  
to the curvature of the earth.

## Mother's 90<sup>th</sup> Birthday At Le Tire Bouchon

Supported by offspring,  
no walker, no wheelchair,  
she enters like a toddler  
searching for each step.  
The neckless, overweight man  
holding her left side, I don't recognize  
as my brother, whom I haven't seen  
in more than a decade.  
My sister, head bobbing uncontrollably,  
keeps mother up on the right,  
and appears herself at the edge of falling apart.  
Looking skeletal, dead already,  
mother smiles with that expression  
of surprise she's had for years--  
ever since they put her in a nursing home  
to get her out of the way.  
She nods as you speak, but you're not sure  
if she's listening, or just trying to deflect  
any real conversation.  
My older sister brings generations to the table,  
children, grandchildren I've never seen.  
Still living for shopping, commodities,  
and propagations of the species,  
she says family is all you need,  
not realizing it's a sort of consolation prize.  
The grey eyes of my comely teenage niece  
shift back and forth,  
following the faux French waiter.  
Conversation is painful, full of cute asides,  
and attempts at comical answers--  
the effect of too many sitcoms.  
Envy's here, barely-disguised contempt.  
No one talks to each other--  
instead they probe, looking for gossip  
to fill phone conversations later on.  
I part with as little as possible,  
knowing they'll put a nasty spin  
on whatever I say.

**Father's Advice***(For H.S.)*

I told you years ago to stop reading--  
no one's ever learned a thing from books;  
better to get a job and earn money.  
Reading's just going to make you think,  
and the more you think, the more  
unhappy you become.  
Sell the books you own.  
Once they've been read,  
what good are they anyway,  
except to lie around and collect dust?  
Besides, if you put more books  
in your attic room, the support beams will crack,  
the floor will collapse  
and all those books will come down some night  
on me and your mother while we're sleeping  
and kill us.

## Cousin Harry

You've been dead so long, I can't remember  
the last time I saw you.  
At eighteen I moved into the city and lost touch,  
but, even before then, it had been years.  
One Sunday a month, in summer, late afternoon,  
you'd show up, as if from another century,  
on your promenade--because you never learned to drive--  
from across town in your white suit, bowtie,  
and brown shoes, their white tops full of tiny vent holes;  
the only visitor formal enough  
to use our front door knocker instead of the bell--  
nearly everyone else walked down the alley  
and banged on the side door.  
You came, for the most part, to visit my mother,  
your first cousin. Snug in the corner of the couch,  
you offered small talk, while my brother and I,  
always eager for company, sat across the room  
on the bottom steps of the staircase leading to the second floor.  
I would lose myself in the lull and unhurried rhythm of your words,  
your pauses, the way you seemed to think about things  
before you said them, and that slight lisp I mistook  
for the sophistication of a foreign accent.  
I knew your house in the good neighborhood by the river,  
yet not too far from the boatyards, baitshacks, the lighthouse,  
and waterfront bars, but you were so different from anyone else  
I couldn't believe you didn't really live in a place  
like New Orleans, Macao, or an artist's barge on the Seine.  
You had investments, my mother said, and never had to work.  
Each December you sent us a crate of oranges and grapefruit  
from Florida where you owned shares in an Indian River citrus grove.

*(Continued)*



*(No stanza break.)*

At the first break in conversation, I'd jump *in--*  
*Tell us a joke, Cousin Harry.*  
You always came prepared. You knew more jokes  
than a TV comedian.  
Whether we got them or not, my brother and I laughed,  
not to pretend, or to please you,  
but because we knew they were funny,  
even if we didn't understand.  
Warily, my father--having relieved my mother in the kitchen  
so she could sit with you--  
passed in and out of the room,  
drying his hands with a dishtowel.  
He was watchful, smiling, but concerned and distant--  
which I didn't understand at the time.  
I thought he had something against your red hair,  
your good manners, the fact that you dressed well,  
had never married, and were more gentle and softspoken  
than any other grownup I knew.  
After you'd gone, my mother bragged to us sometimes  
about your scholarly pursuits; how you were writing a book  
and took the subway into the city every Saturday  
to do research at the 42<sup>nd</sup> Street Library. Only  
years later, when my brother joked, in his nasty way,  
that your research took place in the library men's room,  
did I realize why my father had been so preoccupied.

### Sailing The Hallway With Devon

Feet propped on the seat of a chair,  
he leans back in another, cap on backwards,  
pencil behind his ear, and sings  
*the Titanic sails at dawn.*  
Typing at his laptop, he's a cat walking Satie,  
Rubinstein at Chopin.  
His usual cryptic moon expression,  
bemused by the institution green of the walls,  
*Notice the control,* he calls,  
as we ease from the berth.  
Now he's on the upper deck, watching women  
play badminton badly, his mind  
at work on purloining their pearls.

**Shortcut Through Columbus Park**  
*Chinatown, NYC*

A rat crosses my path Saturday night  
as musicians zip odd shapes  
of ancient instruments into black nylon bags.  
It's just turned dark, midsummer,  
and a single old man, accompanied  
by his four-string banjo,  
wails a last evening ghost song.  
Onlookers surround  
an unfinished table game--  
to illuminate the board,  
they hold cigarette lighter flames  
above the hunched-over players.  
I feel someone watching  
and my eyes meet those of a woman nearby  
who outstares me until I realize she's blind  
and I turn away.  
Most benches are spread with new cardboard,  
occupied by black men  
who unroll blankets and tarps from shopping carts.  
Already spread out, one tucked in,  
reads *Othello* by lamplight.  
Bouncing basketballs, boys in high school jerseys  
pass in the opposite direction,  
taunting their friend up *ahead--*  
*Goodnight, Lyle. Goodnight.*

## First Love

I first fell in love in the seventh grade  
with Sister Mary Ann Magdalen,  
a Dominican, black and white.  
Small and fragile like Emily Dickinson,  
only her face was visible within her habit,  
her cheeks puffed up  
by the tight oval wrapping of her cowl,  
Disobedience was my way  
to get the attention  
of those blue burning eyes  
behind the octagonal spectacles  
she wore to look older.  
What body was buried beneath all those folds?  
You knew she was a woman,  
unlike the older nuns--  
because her voice still had sex in it.  
I thrilled in the warmth of her breath,  
bathed in the spittle from her lips  
as she sputtered, appalled at my *nerve*, my *insolence*, my *gall*.  
The way the sweat broke out on her chin,  
the frustration I caused her,  
the sighs and grunts of effort  
as she gathered herself  
to administer a good beating  
gave me more pain than those tiny fists were capable of.  
She was so new at it, had so little strength--  
still unsure that this was the way  
to discipline young boys.

*(Continued)*

*(Continued from page one. No stanza break)*

I sensed I'd awakened in her  
something more than violence.  
Soon, I came to realize she was trying  
to drive from me, the same thing  
she was trying to drive from herself,  
though she was not sure what it was.  
I wanted to talk about it.  
The morning I came across her  
alone in the sacristy of the church,  
she was crying. An altar boy,  
I'd come early to serve the 6:45.  
She had prepared the altar cloth  
and was laying out the priest's garments.  
I could hear the pigeons  
up in the rafters cooing.  
The Monsignor never let anyone  
get rid of the birds--  
he joked that they signified  
the presence of the Holy Ghost.  
When I asked what was wrong,  
she told me she couldn't be my teacher  
any longer. She was leaving  
for an abbey upstate where nuns like her  
could work out their crises of faith.  
It made me just love her more.  
I wanted to touch her,  
but knew it wasn't allowed.  
After school was over,  
that summer I felt hopeful  
when I heard she'd left the order.  
I was crazy enough to think she'd call,  
or show up at my door  
Then, in September, my heart was broken  
when someone told me  
she'd eloped to Florida with the abbey's gardener.

## Stop Making Sense

The teacher says she wants poems  
that are about something—  
like weightlifting or keeping bees.  
She insists they be grammatically correct,  
and make sense.  
Her idea of sense is a poem about going  
to the orthodontist,  
or being afraid to move to the Chesapeake  
because she doesn't want to live in a red State.  
The students resist, or don't pay attention at all.  
They keep writing whatever comes to them,  
grammar be damned.  
They try not to make sense  
or have poems be about something.

## Gas Station At Night

No one drives out here anymore,  
not since the new highway.  
There are only trees and the empty road,  
a pond you can't see.  
My father leaves the Pegasus sign on--  
he likes the way the light  
carves a globe of illumination  
just overhead,  
holding off the dark.  
For something to do,  
he keeps the place extra clean--  
an excuse not to go home  
to the wrong woman.  
When it gets late,  
he'll sit out front,  
tipping back his chair,  
and read a magazine,  
the radio on.

## Complaint Of The Bus Driver In Love

I know sometimes  
a life of crime would beat this,  
the hours more amenable,  
a story in each job.  
Wrestling this lug of a machine  
up and down each hill,  
a man has to be crazy.  
They expect me to stop on dimes,  
avoid the parked Mercedes,  
to know where everything is,  
the dentist, each check cashing storefront.  
Old ladies smell,  
kids have spent their fares on drugs  
and beg me, noses running,  
not to put them off at the next stop.  
One bum got on at rush hour,  
standing room only,  
and cleared the entire vehicle,  
he stank so bad.  
People leave behind parts of themselves,  
blood on the seats, piss on the floors,  
artificial limbs scattered about,  
and expect me to clean up  
at the end of the day,  
when all I want to do is go home  
to Louise, who is always waiting.



## Listening to Chinese Musicians in Columbus Park, Chinatown, New York City

Next to a grey stone table  
     inlaid with black and green  
                             game board squares,  
 a woman, maybe in her late 50s,  
                             wails through a microphone  
     connected to an amplifier  
                                     strapped into a metal shopping cart.  
 Her cheeks appear to be burning red.  
     At first I think she's crying,  
                             until I realize it's a bad skin condition.  
 Three musicians sit on benches at the table--  
                             two on one side.  
                                     The third strums a type of Chinese lute  
     with four strings, which sounds to me  
                             like an ancient banjo.  
 The other two pluck three-stringed instruments,  
     antique looking,  
                             all long necks and triangle bases  
                             with giant ebony tuning pegs.  
 Not far off, a man with the face of a gnarled tree trunk  
                             kneels on the path tossing bread  
     to pigeons that surround him,  
                                     forcing passerby to detour.  
 As the musicians accompany the woman,  
     they smoke cigarettes, and gaze  
                             at the cars going by, the surrounding buildings,  
 or toward the prison across the street  
                             where, from a sixth-story window, an inmate  
 watches a soccer game in the center of the park.

*(Continued)*

*(continued)*

None of the musicians appear to be listening  
to the singer, nor to each other,  
yet the songs are full of complicated runs  
and unison lines which the men execute  
with absolute control.  
Their casual postures, legs crossed,  
white or blue shirts cut square at the bottom  
and worn outside their pants, makes me think they are waiters  
on their day off from nearby restaurants,  
or workers at the sidestreet vegetable and meat markets.  
The woman, in dark pants and plain grey blouse,  
is a housewife, I'm guessing,  
from a neighborhood tenement.  
She reads the words from a worn spiral notebook--  
the characters written in purple ink.  
The left white sock of the musician who sits alone  
has fallen below his ankle. After one song,  
while the singer pages through her notebook,  
he places his instrument  
on the table, stands up to stamp out his cigarette,  
and walks off to talk to someone in the crowd  
gathered around a group of women  
playing mahjong at a nearby table.  
The teenager next to me quietly leans his bike  
against a tree, sits in the vacated spot,  
and lifts the instrument from the table.  
Making no eye contact with the other players,  
he joins in on the next song, already begun.  
To someone like myself, unfamiliar with this music,  
the singer seems out of tune, grating,  
as if she can't quite find the notes she's searching for.  
But, everyone within hearing looks to me to be Chinese,  
and no one is making faces, covering their ears,  
nor giving any hint that this music  
is anything but pleasant,  
so I assume she is a decent singer.  
If I don't focus on anything outside the park,  
this could be China,  
and this music, I suspect,  
could have been played there.

## Applying For The Lighthouse Keeper's Job

No qualifications,  
I just like to read and be alone.  
Already, I stay up nights--  
especially when the moon is new--  
and prefer to sleep days.  
Eyesight is acute,  
IQ above normal,  
and the idea of endless spiraling stairs  
I find intriguing.  
Fear of heights is nonexistent.  
There's no aversion to repetitive tasks--  
polishing brass, trimming wicks,  
replenishing oil--  
which tend, in my estimate,  
to initiate the meditative.  
The few personal attachments  
have been left behind long ago,  
and physical condition is perfect.  
Dietary requirements are meager,  
but I'd request permission  
to keep rosebushes.

## I Know a Man

I know a man who lives in the city  
and is afraid to leave.  
On 9/11 he walked on Broadway,  
worried about what would happen next.  
He saw people coming from downtown  
covered in ashes, no lights in their eyes.  
That night I phoned and told him  
I'd come pick him up--  
he could spend some time in the country.  
He said the country makes him nervous;  
the sun gives him a headache,  
and he had a meeting the next day, in midtown.  
He's never learned to drive  
preferring to walk wherever he goes,  
or take a train when he has to.  
Once or twice a year, he'll cross into Jersey,  
to visit friends in Hoboken.  
He takes the PATH,  
because it reminds him of the subway,  
but from across the river  
he finds the view of the city unsettling--  
it unmoors him and he can't wait to get back.  
When he reaches home, he walks on Broadway,  
reassured by the sense of vibrations under his feet.

### **Boxcars On A Siding**

They stood for years,  
brown, blue, and yellow,  
at the end of our street,  
just before the woods began.  
We played cards in them, drank beer,  
smoked cigarettes, brought girls.  
One winter, a family of three moved in.  
When developers bought the woods,  
and the State ran power lines overhead,  
we became spooked by the crackle of electricity,  
and knew the days were numbered.  
Last night we figured out how to release the brakes,  
and sent the cars off, rolling out of town.  
Two days later, on the evening news,  
they came to rest in Port St. Lucie.

## Cutter

You confess you're a Cutter--  
assuming I know what that means.  
Your father saw you bleeding,  
and lifted your skirt to find  
your thighs crossed with gouges  
you'd dug out with broken glass.  
You say it was his face,  
the complete incomprehension,  
that made you stop--  
not the hospital he locked you in.  
You detail the times you tried to get out--  
once with a razor, smooth and painless;  
easier than a tattoo, across your throat.  
Then you O.D., which you describe  
with such pleasure--better than this world.  
Whenever I see you the hat's pulled lower,  
the turtleneck higher, you hug yourself tighter.  
You complain of no friends; no one to listen.  
The last man left because you talked  
about yourself too much,  
and never asked a word about him.  
You tell me you spoke to your sister,  
for the first time in years, on the phone last night.  
The two of you discovered that you have the same memory  
of your uncle driving you up a mountain in a convertible.  
Because you always thought it was a dream,  
you had never mentioned this to anyone before.  
He pulled over in a clearing beneath power lines,  
where he gave both of you something to drink.  
Neither of you can remember what happened next.  
Last night, she told you she can only make love  
when she's drunk.  
You said you're tired of never having let anyone in.

### Elizabeth's Last Lines

I spoke to my sister on the phone last night—  
for the first time in years.  
We discovered that we have the same memory  
of Uncle Peter, in a convertible,  
driving us together up a mountain.  
I had never talked to anyone about this before,  
and always thought it was a dream.  
He pulled over in a clearing beneath power lines,  
where he gave us something to drink.  
Neither of us can remember  
what happened next.  
She told me she can only make love  
when she's drunk.  
I said I'm tired  
of never having let anyone in.

## I Wish I Knew

I wish I knew  
how to keep my mouth shut,  
not talk with my hands,  
say the opposite of what I mean  
without giving it away.  
I wish I knew  
how to hold back,  
restrain the enthusiasm,  
exhibit cold regard,  
offer a skeptical sneer,  
and subtly gage the impact of my words.  
I wish I knew  
how to raise an eyebrow,  
calculate an effect, strike a pose,  
and lie with the best of them.  
I wish I could learn  
how to think before I speak,  
and not be so damn ready,  
at the drop of a hat,  
to fall in love.



### Taking the Train to Shakespeare's House

You pass through a number  
of rundown neighborhoods  
which look like The Bronx and Queens.  
If you fall asleep, you wake to find yourself  
moving through endless green fields of grazing sheep  
with a canal in the distance where the only person in sight  
is a boy fishing off the stern of a barge  
Theatrical agents in your coach talk loud on cellphones  
negotiating contracts with reluctant actresses  
to perform in an extravaganza for visiting  
Mikhail Gorbachov, who you thought was dead--  
which reminds you of your son of once asking  
why Gorbachov on television  
had a map North America tattooed on his forehead  
Across the aisle, someone explaining the game of baseball  
refers to Homeplate as 'fourth base.'  
You remain aloof and refuse to get involved.  
Stratford Station is done up in a disconcerting grey  
and confectioner's pink. Thinking you're in the wrong place,  
you keep looking around expecting Virginia Wolfe to appear  
and ask if she can take you to the river.  
During Lear, Ian McClellan, searching for a date,  
pull his pants down. He's got a member  
the size of a donkey, and you want to shield  
your lover's eyes, but she leans over and says he's gay—  
though you're not quite sure how she's using the word.  
Still, you think, that's quite impressive.  
A dirty goose follows you through the willows  
along the Avon, and he's persistent as a New York  
cab driver who locks the doors and won't let you out  
until you give him a tip.

*(continued)*

*(No stanza break)*

In Trinity Church, the Sexton tries to interest you  
in Christianity, when all you want to do is see the grave.  
You try not to be impolite as you sneak away  
while his back is turned, quickly eye the inscription,  
and slip out a side door.

In front of the only house in town that looks as if  
it might be old enough, they tell you it's not really his house,  
but the one next door, though they're sure  
he must have gone into it a few times, and it will give you  
a good idea of what things must have been like back then,  
so, after coming such a long way,  
why not pay the fee and go in a have a look?

## Dead Cat

Why should I become so upset  
at finding the cat dead by the side of the road,  
hit by a car sometime during the night?  
I kneel down to touch him,  
and he's already stiff, a small touch of blood  
at the corner of the mouth.  
*Gonna miss you, buddy*, I say--  
no one's around.  
Later, I tell the kids it's better this way.  
He was getting old and slowing down,  
probably feeling the aches of age,  
the onset of one disease or another.  
He'd been with us the longest,  
already old when he arrived  
from a neighbor's barn  
where the other cats wouldn't accept him.  
The first few times he showed up  
we gave him scraps,  
but he wouldn't eat until we went away.  
It wasn't until he appeared one morning  
with a bleeding gash in his neck beneath the chin,  
that I realized if we didn't take him in,  
he wouldn't last much longer.  
For most of the year, he preferred  
to live outside, roaming the back pasture  
and the neighbors' fields.  
Sometimes, I'd look out the window  
and see him stalking a mole or mouse--  
poised, focused, as deep in concentration  
as a mathematician.

*(Continued)*

*(No stanza break)*

Over time, he became fat,  
big as a skunk, the shape of a goose,  
and spent most of the day asleep on the porch.  
We'd talk in the mornings,  
he answering my questions with the same syllable  
about what he'd done the night before--  
then, with a look, telling me to hurry up  
and serve him breakfast, reminding me if I'd forget,  
to include a little milk, maybe a saucer of water.  
To come inside on a winter night,  
he'd wait patiently at the door  
for someone to realize it was too cold, even for him.  
The next morning, wanting to go out,  
he'd stand on his hind legs and swipe the sleigh bells  
hanging from the inside front doorknob.  
We became good friends over time;  
he waiting for me at the property's edge  
while I disappeared up the road for a walk.  
To the end, he could still run, which surprised me,  
take off tearing through the pasture, sleek at high speed,  
when I called him for dinner.  
Now, I lift him up, and place him on the running board  
of my older son's pickup  
those two understood each other best.  
My son knows where to bury him  
with the others in the soft dirt clearing  
beneath the trees down by the back wall.

### The Fine Arts Building At Night

A door opens to the dark  
where a coloratura repeatedly misses the high note.  
Oblivious to passersby, a chorus of angels  
in everyday clothes, flapping wings in time,  
counts *One, two, three, four*.  
They block the foyer, dancing, arms out,  
and watch themselves  
in the reflection of a large black window.  
So as not to break their time,  
I sidle against the back wall, nearly falling  
over gilded organ stovepipes  
stacked in sections by an elevator door.  
In the theater of domestic contention,  
girls shout cruelty and grab each other by the hair.  
A violinist plays heartbreaking cadenzas.  
Late one night, a dancer alone, her back to me,  
high heels and tiny black dress  
halfway up her thighs, bends over a boom box.  
From the corner of an eye, she marks my entrance.  
As I slow my pace, she delays,  
legs spread, letting me take her in,  
and pretends to have trouble choosing a song.  
The two of us connected by this perfect moment,  
everything suspends—until a door opens  
at the end of the hall and someone walks in.  
Before I can say a word,

## Second Avenue

I had a friend named Gary  
who died of AIDS,  
long before it had a name.  
He lived alone,  
in the building next door,  
the one with no address.  
I think of him now,  
and the night is cold--  
the moon shines through  
the window of his empty room.  
The building  
remains abandoned.  
For years, it's been scheduled  
to be demolished.  
I know it's useless  
to try and sleep--  
the machinery of the dark  
will keep me awake.

