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Father's Day

Before your father takes the train cross country,
in a storm of *unprecedented violence*,
one of those new storms the result of global warming,
the flight to Chicago drops 5,000 feet in an instant.
Passengers throw up and bang their heads
on the overhead luggage compartments.
To steady his legs, and never having been to Chicago,
he walks around all morning,
observing traffic congestion, skyscrapers, a canal.
He eats at an automat, something he's always wanted to do,
but didn't know they still existed.
Over the phone, he tells you half the year is over,
and he's just gotten used to not having to think
before writing the year down.
On the *Prairie Zephyr* he connects with new people.
To keep retirees from boredom, the group
plays guessing games to find the lost names of things.
Mostly, he looks out the window.
It's like watching a river.
After dark, all he can see is his reflection.
He discovers a position where a distortion in the glass
makes him look like a younger man.
His neck becomes stiff from trying to hold that pose.
He'd like to call again to tell you
how he misses your mother,
and of how much you remind him of her,
but he is afraid you'll be asleep.

This Is A Winter

This is a winter like the Armstrong recording
of *Potato Head Blues*,
crackly and rough with no end in sight,
a winter that can scrape the skin
off your knees and leave your tongue
stuck to the metal flagpole, asking no forgiveness.
This is a winter like a full-color atlas,
like pictures from the Hubble heading further
into space while it sends back signals
long after having been programmed to quit.
This is a winter like the numbers
you can count on the fingers of one hand,
like the hulls of sailboats frozen
in ice, like fists stuck in pockets,
and Alexander Hamilton's picture on the ten dollar bill
the wind blows up against your leg.
This is a winter like the overheard
cellphone conversation of someone who has nothing
to say, but doesn't want to hang up.
This is a winter like the expression of exasperation
on a swimsuit model's rejected magazine cover.
This is a winter like a cubist painting--
two eyes and a nose all bunched together on one
side of your face.
This is a winter like the woman across the table from me
her head in her hands, a bright red ribbon trailing
through her fingers.
I wonder if she knows how in theatre
they sometimes use red ribbon
to signify a streaming trail of blood.

I Am Portable

Back from Stratford and nothing's changed.
The house is the same mess I left it in.
Fed by a neighbor for a week,
the cat rushes up while I unpack the car.
She rubs my leg, causing me to wonder,
since I've begun to make peace
with my imperfections,
how I no longer regret who I am.
The flight over the ocean was hell—
the wasted blonde behind me
kicking the back of my seat,
bad food and movies, inoperable earphones,
the inability to read because, for lack of sleep,
I had reached the edge of delirium.
I kept watching the map on the screen before me—
the tiny plane moving across Ireland, the North Atlantic,
until we caromed off Greenland and curved south
over the desolate Canadian north.
I looked out the window on snow-covered mountains,
endless and monotonous, and knew
if we went down, those who survived
would not be found in time.
A baby cried from Europe to America,
only quieting as we began our final descent.
For the first time I realized how portable I am--
unlike those who attach and nurse their loneliness.

Angel

I once had an angel
register for one of my courses,
and though I don't believe in ghosts,
god, or other superstitions,
it didn't take long to figure out
she was the real thing.
On the first day, with the rest of the students,
she shuffled into class
taking her seat in the last row center,
her back against the brick wall.
Overwhelmed by the glow,
I tried not to stare--
though it seemed
I was the only one who noticed.
When she handed in her first paper
I told her, in conference,
she should be at Harvard.
She smiled and shrugged it off,
but later went there for post grad.
I wondered about her wings.
When she grew to trust me with her secret,
she said they were detachable,
and she usually left them in her dorm room.

Etant donnees*Duchamp*

The double doors bought in Spain,
at a reasonable price. Drilled
peepholes your own addition.
Bricks brought in one by one
by friends, gathered over years
passing New York demolition sites.
Never letting on why you need them,
through two decades of assembly,
you eschew company, openings,
dinners, accolades, and let everyone
believe you've given up,
reduced life to a bored game--
while you pursue the secret devotion
to one woman's body, cast among weeds,
sticks, and branches.
You detail the pigskin torso, limbs,
the illuminated waterfall,
and send small casements of colored semen-dribble
to keep her with you when she's away.

Philadelphia

Looking for a place to stay,
you miss the last exit.
Next to the abandoned ferry slip,
a man awaits the trolley to Fishtown.
Numbers hang across the river,
where crews secure tethered sculls,
and team insignia deface railroad bridge abutments.
Peeling stucco houses on treeless hillsides
line streets too narrow for cars.
Refusing to acknowledge faultlines,
we leave each other piecemeal,
the dislocation taking years.
You push open the screen door,
beneath the sign reading 'Ladies Entrance,'
at the rear of Revenger's Cove.
Under your breath, you repeat your mantra--
avoid the humorless, the cat named Smug,
the face you had before Facebook.
The bed & breakfast features wooden pillows.
Side streets remain white and cobbled,
while the inmate crew does the cleanup job.

Kitchen Cuttings
A Mother's Offering

As we finished supper
at the kitchen table,
you began the dishes--
the sink full of soapy water.
You gasped, suddenly
jerking your hand out,
as if bitten by a snake.
Blood poured from fingers
where you'd grasped a serrated knife
by the wrong end.
Cuts deep enough for stitches,
you pretended nothing was wrong.
I suffer in silence, offering it up,
your expression said,
which meant you knew
how the martyred saints,
under horrible tortures,
could endure so much pain,
and you would do the same.
We were supposed to pity you,
and understand, in some way,
it was our fault.

Ode To Neruda

Though together for a time
on this same planet, we never met--
separated by continents,
we wouldn't have been expected to--
you in one hemisphere, me in another.
I know you only through your words,
translations at first, a few photos,
you the proprietor of the Ode.
Eventually, I learned your language,
lemon slices, the colored plumage
of tropical birds, your socks.
While others went on incessantly
about themselves, you, continually astonished,
talked about the infinite detail of this world.
You filled your poems
with more objects than subjects,
which is why you wrote so much,
and your poems are so long--
you knew you'd never be able
to get it all in.

Mountain Lake

A Lovers' Guide

Follow the path
to the source of the lake
created a century ago
by the Army Corps of Engineers.
During drought, the tip of a steeple
shows midstream at the center of Brighton,
evacuated and flooded in this highland valley
at the behest of the millionaire hunting club,
long since abandoned.
Go as far as it is dry through the marshland,
among the reeds, pools ripped blue
to silver by the sharp breeze.
Observe tracks of muskrat, deer, turtles, snakes, herons;
the habitat of migratory birds.
Leave the aimless violence of one species
for the predatory feed and be fed upon of others.
Notice the display, offhanded, of the Cedar Waxwing,
as it careens and skims, eating insects
above the water's surface.
Find a dry spot, flatten a bed of stalks, comfortable, clean.
Lie down, your skin responding to direct sunlight;
goosebumps from the crisp air.
Believe yourselves alone, two spots
awkward and bare, rustling the reeds, out of breath,
watched through unseen binoculars.

I Wonder If You Care What You Have Missed

My brother still keeps you on his mantle.
It's been over a year now.
Claiming arrears must be settled
before they'll let you in,
he puts off bringing you to the cemetery.
I think he just likes having you around.

Your daughter is having difficulty
selling the house in Arlington.
She says only Asians can afford
to come to look at the place,
and on seeing the graveyard next door,
they get scared off.
She's called here a number of times,
hinting that she wants to come over.
Since her husband died—internal organs disintegrated
by Agent Orange—she's turned to me as head of the family,
only I won't forgive her for what she did
to come between you and me.

Yesterday, a therapist on the radio
said the way to find peace is to forgive those
who've committed the unforgivable against you.
I suspect he's right, yet I'm going to take time
and think long about it before I decide for myself.

As for myself, I'm still living up in the country,
alone on a road where no cars go by.
This morning I looked out
and saw a flock of turkeys in the yard.
They faced the pond, their backs to me,
squatting like a row of black headstones.
I watched them for awhile, until they took off
and rose over the pines toward the woods.
I'd never realized such ugly birds could fly so high,
and appear so graceful.

Licensed Librarian

Thanks to the DNA
which didn't match,
you're free to leave now--
with fifty dollars, a degree,
and the suit of clothes you came in on.
The judge has apologized on behalf of the State,
agreeing you could never get your life back--
you, the non-believer who knew it was all you had.
Compensation will be forthcoming.
Chiseled like a statue from a block of stone,
having worked the decades with weights,
you've lost the paunch, shaved the head,
decorated all visible skin
with calligraphy of your own design.
Your mind is made up
to take the bus to Philadelphia,
where you've never been,
to live in a city with streetcars,
and look for a library job--
because, of all, you'll miss
the book cart the most,
and making recommendations
to help others get through their time..

These Are The Days*Odalisque*

Waiting for the mail after coffee,
the cat fed, the paper read online;
nothing more to do than wander
the house, the yard,
in t-shirt and underpants--
she luxuriates in the lack
of obligation.
Knowing how few things
one really needs in this life,
how most people are there
just to waste your time,
she tries to decide between
No vacancies here,
and *Everything is vacant.*
The afternoon she'll spend
reading in bed, Flaubert or Simenon,
too hot to do anything else.
Come evening, the few friends
she lets in will bring wine,
and leave their shoes at the door.

The Late Ones

Winter-thin woods behind school--
snow ridges line skeleton branches.
Crossing guards, reflective vests,
stop signs resting on their chests.
return to corner lawnchairs--
coffee-thermos smoke mixed with breath;
Only eyes visible, the late ones
under hoods, scarf-muffled
mouths and noses,
dragged by parents,
slip on ice beneath
unshovelled sidewalks,
and stumble through drifts
in cumbersome boots

York

Sunday morning a bad dream wakes me.
I don't know what time it is--
the clocks should have been changed;
forward or back, I can't remember.
I try to guess the hour by the quality of light,
by the sun on the brick wall
just beyond the window.
It must be early, for the pigeons
on the electric wire out back
have just begun their songs.
Soothing roosters, one coos two notes,
low to high, smooth as Billy Eckstein.
The other, rural blues singer,
puts a rough curdle, a burr into three notes.
To forget the dream and get back to sleep,
I concentrate on the songs--
in this city that is not mine,
where I visit and feel safe,
despite the gunfire
on weekend nights,
the creek nearby that smells
like a tractor trailer, ahead of me
on the highway,
transporting garbage from another state,
and the voices at all hours
from the vacant apartment
up above.

Solitude
Emily Dickinson

I am behind you,
behind the hutch.
I've slipped beneath the sofa,
to the floor under the piano,
where I can listen from the hall,
from the top of the stairs,
but am too awkward
to participate.
I can't slow my speech,
for the small things to be said,
to be social,
like the men who talk business,
the ladies who visit.
My words rush out to astonishment--
what the eyes must think
when I speak.
Yet, Vinnie and Susan listen,
I am relaxed with them in the kitchen.
I hear when Austin makes love to Mabel
in the parlor on the floor.
It's been going on for years.
They seem to have forgotten
I am in the house, the ghost,
the mad, eccentric girl of Amherst.
I watch them eat,
but am not hungry.
Even the doctor intrudes,
when he examines me

(continued)

(No stanza break)

from his seat in the parlor
as I walk by in the hall.
I don't need his diagnosis.
I prefer white
and the children who appear in the yard
when I lower the basket.
This has all made me cry.
The exuberance of words
pushes at my breast,
my abdomen,
till I have to write them down.
Father is always away.
And I stay up late, in secret,
and make packets sewn up with ribbons,
which I keep in my closet, my drawers.
My love is deferred, my passion withheld.
I prefer the room with the light on,
the books that will listen.
I am the boy who can't walk straight,
with one crooked leg,
yet who runs for the ball every time,
and falls and becomes more scratched
and broken, his face a lump of scars,
for all the times he has tried, but refuses to learn.
When I am enthused, which is always,
I can barely speak for excitement,
like this breeze through the open window
that comes to me tonight with the smell
of the entire world on it.

She Tells Me Some Actress

She tells me some actress
has been busted on the news
for buying crack,
while I'm on my porch sitting with the cat,
and sometimes I can't hear her
because she's so far away,
and the birds are making too much noise here,
because it's twilight, the beginning of June,
and they refuse to give up the day.
I tell her I don't understand
those who want to get out of this world,
because I haven't figured it out yet,
and it's such a bewildering gift,
you can't give up for a minute,
like these birds who surround me with this music,
which they just give away.

No Closing Time

The single clear light--
an isosceles triangle
from the lamp above the pool table.
Heads in shadow, fingertips chalk-blue,
bodies lean in to strike.
Nobody watches TV, the volume off,
except for the weather.
At the window, two patrons talk
about the snowfall so deep the buses
have stopped running, and the bridge
has shut down--preventing the bartender
from getting home.
The reassuring crack at the break
sends a liquid warmth through the spine.
Let the blizzard fulminate, the drifts
pile up against the door;
pinball, the pool table, and jukebox
are all on automatic--
even the drinks are free tonight.

How To Write

Get up every morning before the birds, before the cars.
Know your way around in the dark.
Grab as much of this as you can—
be greedy about it.
Fill the blue cup with new coffee.
Use the silence to your advantage—
take soundings, measure depths, listen.
You will still have the day before you.

State of The Union

Anna Nicole Smith
is still dead--
they're no longer fighting
over the body.
I slept in my car
on the Pennsylvania interstate
four nights in ten degree weather--
until the snowplows finally came through.
New Orleans will never be the same--
people have left and won't come back.
This morning I worshipped
at the Church of Broken Pieces.
James Brown is gone.
We have no godfather of soul.

The Light Above Cities

The light above cities
is an eerie music,
a ghost in the chair
with its back to you.
The light above cities
is the way to keep
from giving away too much,
from crying out loud,
from taking it out on someone else,
someone you would die for
but cannot live for.
The light above cities
is the breathing of statues,
the first thing you see
on the moving stairway,
the blue carpet,
the last night of your life.
The light above cities
glows halogen and seaweed green--
reflection of what was there
before cities.

Why I Write Poetry

because it's easier than prose,
not as burdensome, architectural,
all that moving blocks of stone,
rebars and dumptrucks,
the heavy physics of language.
Poems should fly, suddenly,
like the woodpecker in the dismal swamp
believed extinct for forty years,
which an ornithologist thought he saw recently--
but only from the corner of an eye.
And they should be short,
for rarely can they sustain themselves
beyond a single page.
You know how it is though--
once people have your attention,
they like to go on.
There are no rules,
and, fortunately, you don't need a license
to write poetry--
otherwise, all the wrong people would have one.
To tell the truth, I dislike writing--
it's much too frightening;
there are depths one should avoid
to lead a peaceful life.
But when I can't sleep at night,
for some reason I feel compelled
to leave these messages
that say I was here,
this is what it was like.

The Passenger

I've always wanted to be Jack Nicholson
in Antonioni's *The Passenger*,
a journalist on assignment in North Africa
who steals a dead man's passport,
switches photos, and decides
to keep the appointments
found in a notebook on the body.
At the first rendezvous, in a church in England,
he's contacted by a gun runner
who passes him a sheaf of papers,
with pictures of weapons checked off to be delivered later.
On the roof of Gaudi's Barcelona cathedral,
Maria Schneider shows up.
He tells her he's seen her before,
on the steps of a German university.
They rent a car and spend the night
in a hotel near the Alhambra.
The next day, when the car breaks down
in a rocky landscape in southern Spain,
she leaves on a bus, and he ends up alone,
asleep in a small hotel.
A wooden ceiling fan rotates slowly,
while a man enters the room
and shoots Jack Nicholson in the back of the head.
This, I realize, is the price I have to pay
for wanting to be in this movie.
The camera then moves across the room,
and out through a window
where it pans slowly, full-circle,
taking in a boy rolling a metal hoop;
an old man strolling near the wall
of an empty bullring.
Then, someone is whistling.

(continued)

(Continued from page one. No stanza break)

Gradually, it becomes evening.

The camera turns toward the front of the hotel
as the pastel lights of the sign over the entrance come on.

The owner, with a mustache and heavy paunch,
comes out and stands on the front steps to smoke a cigarette.

He doesn't realize someone has just been killed
in one of the rooms.

The camera moves back.

All you hear are the regular sounds of evening:
indistinct voices, people walking by on rocky dirt--
a car starts up and drives away.

Dream Noir

You wait on a subway platform—
a combination of somewhere in the London Underground,
and the Philadelphia 63rd Street Transfer Station.
It's crowded, rush hour.
From the heavy, dark clothes of the commuters,
light-bulbs on in daytime,
the general closeness of the air,
it must be late afternoon, warm for winter.
Everyone's dressed as if this is taking place
in the 1940s. Only you stick out
in a crumpled London Fog. Two women,
invisible to each other, one more glamorous,
with the promise of a job, pulls at your arm
to make you follow her
through a porcelain-tiled passageway.
The other, in a maroon, black-veiled hat,
holding her purse with two hands,
faces you and asks *Are you coming, or not?*
The train pulls in,
and suddenly this dream turns tragic—
you *can* feel yourself become upset in your sleep.
The one succeeds in leading you down the corridor,
while the other, who you truly love, turns away in tears,
and disappears with the crowd into the car.

White Castle, Jersey Dawn

It smells of floors mopped
with dirty water.
A broken wheelchair blocks
the bathroom door.
In the next booth, a man explains
that after receiving an artificial heart,
he can no longer love his grandchildren.
This is the hour
between dark and light,
when the ghost wanders off
to the parking lot,
people sleep in old cars,
a Muslim on his mat
prays towards sunrise.
From the airport across the highway,
a constant scream of corporate jets take off,
as if they can't get away
from this neighborhood
fast enough.

Living On Grand Street

Walk down Clinton Street,
 dirtiest street in the city, especially in winter,
 so dangerous you stay off the sidewalk,
 keep to the middle of the road, away from buildings,
 and concentrate on the spaces between parked cars,
 where someone can jump out and slit your throat
 for your overcoat.
 Crystal turned out to be turning a trick
 in the bar on Essex--
 and I thought she'd just liked me.
 Later, when not working, she'd come over to smoke
 with Kevin and me. Said she found us amusing.
 She'd tell us what it was like to work Delancy Street,
 about the things men asked her to do.
 Those stories stay with me like recurring dreams.
 She never wanted money, and liked to sing
 when Kevin played the piano.
 I didn't understand the attraction, but admired
 her curiosity and patience with us.
 Sonny Rollins lived in the building next door--450 Grand.
 I'd listen for hours by the window on the airshaft
 while he practiced.
 One night I came across him on the bridge
 when I was walking home.
 Sideways, he looked like a hieroglyph.
 He tensed as I neared him, and left off playing.
 Four in the morning, early April, so quiet for Manhattan,
 only a few cabs going over to Brooklyn,
 the river still and reflecting the lights.
 He covered his horn with his coat.
Hey, you're Sonny Rollins, I said.
 He shook his head, and wouldn't look at me,
 didn't want to be bothered.
 At seventeen, what did I know?
 I was about to stop and argue,
 telling him I knew who he was, he couldn't fool me--
 until I realized how ridiculous it would sound
 trying to convince somebody of who he is, when you both know.
 He just wanted to play, so I kept on going.
 Anyway, my German shepherd was pulling on his leash
 wanting to get off the bridge because he could never
 get used to the vibrations in his paws
 whenever the subway came by.

(continued)

(no stanza break.)

The afternoon Kevin jumped off the roof of our building
I was downtown at work. That morning the bookstore owner told me
we were closing for good, the whole block had been sold.
Disappointed at losing the first job I'd ever cared about,
I went out with Julia
the cashier with the red hair that I loved
and got drunk and didn't find out
about Kevin till the next night when I got home
and he was already dead
and his parents arrived to pick up his clothes
and the music he'd been writing and had left on the piano.
I couldn't bear to go to the wake
in the town we'd both grown up in,
so I left my dog with Julia and took the train and bus
to LaGuardia, bought a seat on the first plane,
and ended up in Flagstaff and stayed there until Christmas,
when I just couldn't take all those people walking around
shopping in Bermuda shorts, and Christmas trees decorated in malls
with a hundred and ten degrees outside.
It just didn't make sense, so I came back on Christmas Eve.
and took my usual stroll down Fifth Ave.
which was my habit,
since I always waited till the last minute to buy presents.
I must have seen some movie when I was a kid
about how walking down Fifth Avenue was the only way
to get the real feel of Christmas.
Later that night, I went out to my parents' house.
They were already asleep.
The lights were out, but I knew where
they hid the key and I let myself in,
and sat in the living room for awhile,
put the tree lights on, and drank a beer.
There was some snow on the ground outside,
enough to cover the grass.
I stayed there only a week,
because I couldn't keep still after Kevin died,
so I hitchhiked to Miami, and took a flight to Bogota.
In six weeks I reached Macchu Picchu.
I'd read Neruda's book and thought I might find something
spiritual in those mountains,
but after waiting around a few days,
appreciating the stone walls and the view,
and trying to imagine what it had been like five hundred years ago,
I knew that, for all my communing, I wasn't going to receive
any secret messages.

Sunday Morning
Woman in a Room

Her skin too white, hair too red,
she stands near the window,
her back to you.
Startled by her nakedness,
you're about to apologize and leave.
Your door was unlocked, she says.
The room barely furnished,
like a hotel in the '30s,
the upholstery's a dull, ugly brown.
Sunday morning, in this town
you've forgotten the name of,
people have gone off to church.
You haven't moved as she steps
into her black heels and reaches for her skirt.
Wait, you're about to say, but your voice
would be drowned out by the siren
of an ambulance or police car.
Through the window you can see houses
all the way to the end of the street,
just before the hills begin.
Last night, walking out alone,
you saw a tree hit by lightning,
burning in the middle of an empty field.

Waiting For The End Of The World

Someday, I'm going to write a poem called *Drive-By*,
about a man who leaves his family but keeps
coming back every evening at dinner time,
cruising past the house he used to live in.
I'll follow that with *The Tunnel of Love*,
which will not be about sex,
but about a gang of children who live inside
an amusement park and only come out late at night
after the park is closed.
Vanishing Cream will be about my mother
and the week she disappeared after using a cosmetic—
nobody could find her,
but she was there in the house all the time.
The Green Couch will be private and elliptical,
about a young woman who prefers to make love on her couch
because it's the only place she can have an orgasm.
The couch is becoming beat-up and worn-out
from her carrying it around
every time she moves to a new apartment.
The poem will end with a dilemma.
The last poem will be called
Waiting For The End Of The World
about a man who leaves the television on all the time,
with the sound turned off,
because he doesn't want to miss the continuous news coverage
of the end of the world when it happens.

The Hemlock Society

My brother has joined the Hemlock Society.
Every month a magazine comes, he tells me,
wrapped in brown paper—full of ways to kill yourself.
 He's decided to take things into his own hands,
 for which I admire him. We talk long on the phone
 about methods of dying.
A client, he says, on Madison Ave., with cancer,
took a handful of pills.
To make sure of the job, he tied a plastic bag over his head
Left everything to his family.
 My brother is determined not to let medicine have its way with him,
 milk him dry of every last dollar, every breath,
 the way it does with our mother.
 She should have been gone years ago,
 yet they'll keep her hanging on till she's broke--
 then let the State take over.
Which method have you decided on? I ask.
 He mentions a few--drowning, hanging,
 flying his plane out over the Atlantic until the fuel runs out,
 but he's not decided. *Guns are out,* he says,
too much of a mess, and too unsure.
 I ask him to send me the magazines,
 after he's through--I mean, after he's read them.
 But, he says he wants to hold on to them, for reference.
You can have them when I'm done, he jokes. *I'll leave them to you.*
 He's younger than I am, but talks as if he thinks he'll go before me.
 I remind him of our grandmother who died in bed, in the house
 she'd bought with her own money, and had lived in all her life.
 Our mother took care of her till the end,
 and assumed, I'm sure, we'd do the same for her.
 Five children, yet she spends every day in a home,
 bound to a wheelchair, unable to move on her own.
 She's as conscious as she was forty years ago,
 doesn't miss a thing,
 and, though she can't speak a word,
 the rage in her eyes terrifies me.

Gamines' Tango

for the boys who sleep on cardboard together
on the sidewalk, their faces wet,
their noses running,
who are good for a couple of years,
and bum coins from the tourists,
who pay to keep them away,
the boys who buy glue to huff from paper bags,
and stumble downtown,
till the soldiers round them up,
and drive them in trucks
while they don't know where they are going—
the soldiers who say the boys don't
feel the bullet when it enters the brain,
or the push from the cliff,
their pants around their ankles.
The bodies pile up
in *Body Drop Gorge*,
a must-see ravine outside of town,
just off the Widower's Highway.

Idle Threat

I stay home nights
watching black and white movies,
and try not to think
of where you are.
When the moon comes up,
I hide under the bed,
like an old dog,
afraid of the ghost
in the yard.
I tell myself one day
I'm going to take the long way home--
drive through the Endless Mountains
to see if they're really endless

Poem Noir

There's a look in the driver's eye--
I can see it in the rearview mirror.
Doors locked, he won't take directions,
and makes another wrong turn,
heading around a barrier,
where the sign reads *Bridge Out*.
I know what you're about to say,
but there's not enough time,
so kiss me once again.

The Rhythm Of The Morning

It begins late at night,
with a trip to the bathroom.
Then, you wait hours
to get back to sleep--
or, flashlight in hand, you wander the house,
attic to cellar, searching for the source
of the creaks and thumps
left, you assume, by the first inhabitants
at the end of the nineteenth century.

Last night, the moon full,
and the coyotes howled.
You listened to them, instead of music.
They still frighten you,
as you imagine yourself
in the woods on the hill in back,
propped against a tree, your leg broken;
the pack of them circling, vicious, salivating,
waiting to move in for the kill.

Eventually, you return to the dream,
the recurring one, where you cross a suspension bridge,
its roadway blown down by the storm.
You swing from cables, or descend
to river level, climb through wreckage,
to save the woman waving
from the opposite bank, her clothes torn off.
When you reach shore, after hours it seems,
always she's gone.

You wake before sunrise; to get in some reading
while it's dark and quiet. You watch the news
to make sure the world is still there-
that it hasn't gone up in smoke while you slept.
And, no matter how bad it gets,
you're thankful that you still have things to do.
This and the daylight, reassure you.

Ode To Susan

Susan, who I fell in love with at my job,
 and the first time we made love said *Thank you, that was wonderful.*
You made me think there was a line of men outside the door
and down the stairs waiting to fuck me--
I couldn't stop coming.
 And I'd thought she'd been faking it.
 At that point I knew, no matter how much I cared,
 we would not be together for long.
 For months I'd nursed a secret crush on her,
 daydreaming of her overbite,
 and wondering if her pubic hair was as fiery red
 and uncontrollable as the hair on her head.
 I never thought I had a chance until the afternoon
 she came by while I was at the copy machine in the hall
 and grabbed my ass and kept on going.
 How was I supposed to interpret that?
 I nearly swooned over the way she said *Washington*,
 putting an r into it and insisting it was pronounced *Warshington*.
 I loved her gap teeth, and told her she reminded me
 of the Wife of Bath. She didn't know what I was talking about,
 and didn't care once I explained.
 I was flattered, though, when she took my advice
 and cancelled the appointment
 to have the space between her teeth filled in.
 It was she who told me, when we were alone in the office,
 John Lennon had been killed.
 Then she pushed me back in the CEO's chair,
 and swallowed my cock with more control and command
 than anyone has before or since--
 leaving me semi-conscious with pleasure.
 Assuming I'd live with her, though we'd never talked about it,
 she moved out on the Jersey boyfriend, and into an apartment on le Street.
 By then, I'd realized she was crazy and would break my heart if I stayed too long.
 Sometimes, you just love people for who they are and you can't help it.
 Once she understood I wasn't moving in, she lost interest.
 Later, she actually took a job in Warshington,
 and began drinking too much.
 We'd still get together once in a while, go to a bar,
 and pretend to speak French all night, though neither of us knew the language.
 The more we drank the better the French became.
 I haven't seen her in decades, yet I still believe there is a place,
 though not in this world, where, despite everything, we can be together.

Tectonics of the Heart
(Translation From The Magyar)

O, how I miss you.
I cannot breathe without you,
I cannot move without missing you.
I go out to the field where I howl,
a coyote gone mad,
without being heard,
because the neighbors are so far away.
I lie in the weeds and beg to be taken,
yet hours later, long after dark,
I'm still there and unharmed,
when the few pangs of hunger force me up
and into the kitchen, where I prepare
a huge meal, enough for eleven,
and set that many places at the table.
I eat it all, moving from plate to plate,
forcing conversation,
downing glass after glass of wine,
until, after dessert, I'm back on the floor,
bawling with how much I miss you.

O, Let Me Be Taken

Tattoos on the girls' arms in class,
leftover cake, and visible amoebas
growing in a glass of water—
I can't concentrate on work,
and am distracted by the songs
of birds outside the window—
they will not be denied,
and don't care if I listen or not;
it's not meant for me.
I wonder how long
before this peace will be broken,
before people pass by talking loudly,
or on skateboards,
or someone bouncing a basketball.
O, let me be taken on such a morning as this.

Letter To An Ex-Lover

I apologize for not getting back,
for not talking to you since the night
in the 9th Circle,
when we were drunk and you said
you preferred to use men
before they use you.
I assumed you were talking about me,
and took offense.

I'm sorry for deleting your e-mails before I read them;
for leaving the Christmas cards unopened.

I hated my life when I knew you,
and believed you were partly to blame.
Since then, I've lived with an order of monks
in Cheyenne -- until they realized my doubt
was infecting their novices.
Later, a Subaru dealership in Flagstaff,
then night guiding fishermen in the Keys.

I've been back a few times, but never called.
You passed me once on Madison.
I saw the recognition in your eyes,
and made sure to become lost in the crowd.
I couldn't bear the thought of catching up,
the evasions, the lies.

I had a wife for awhile. Unable to tolerate
my self-absorption, she's gone. I agreed
with your husband that it was right to leave you.
I no longer answer his inquiries either.
The last thing he said, before I gave him your address,
was that he no longer worshipped
at the Church of Broken Pieces.

Elegy

I don't keep your pictures--
they never looked like you,
and I regret that we had no chance
to properly sign off,
but you couldn't talk,
and no one was sure
if you even knew I was there.
I put you in the basement,
and forgot I was supposed to
bury you next to Dad--
but there's a question of consecrated ground,
and twenty years of upkeep in arrears--
and neither of us ever acknowledged
the Church.
I remember lousy meals, endless car rides;
the theatre of domestic contention.
Closure is a phony word,
another bad idea
to keep people from feeling.
Just as my kids don't owe me a thing,
I owe you nothing.

He Died Tossing Carpets

the way he'd lived,
lifting the heavy samples by himself
Asking for help would have been an admission
he was too old for the job.
Embarrassed at finding him
sprawled on the selling floor,
the men he worked with
kept a distance.
It was just after lunch.
The customer eventually wandered away,
while a passerby tried CPR.
A week before,
he'd returned from England,
his first trip abroad,
where he'd bought the boots
he was wearing.
Ankle-high, soft brown leather--
something, he said, he'd always wanted,
and could never find in this country.

Untitled

This is for S.
who loved me so much
she would have picked me up off the sidewalk
after a night of drinking, my pants all pissed
my shirt covered with the slime of my puke
(this has never happened, but it's the way I imagine myself)
and she would have held me and kissed me
and carried me home and put me in a bath
and run the warm water and washed me all over
as if she'd just taken me down from the Cross
and revived me with sex and dried me
and dressed me in clean clothes
and brought me into her kitchen
for a cup of hot coffee and a honeydew melon
S. who knew how to drive the beast from my heart
to keep me in this world
who would have done anything I asked
if only I'd asked
who I never could love as much
as she needed me to love her
Since her, there's been no one to talk to
I feel like I've been holding my breath for years
I eat alone and yell back at the TV
I try to imagine where she lives now
Would I recognize her if we passed on the street?
I know she still carries me inside
like one of those pictures of saints
with a prayer on the back they give you at funeral masses
to keep in your pocket forever
so you'll never forget the dead
How could I tell her I desperately tried
to love her more than I was able?
She probably has grandchildren by now
and they have no idea
but I am the witness I can tell them
how young and beautiful she was.

Mummers Parade

The tintinnabulation rises from Shunk Street,
long before they cakewalk into view.
Blackface banned in '64,
still no blacks,
they began with Swedish first settlers
centuries ahead of minstrelsy.
This year the City backs out--
they pony up anyway.

Spectacle of plumage, rhinestone finery,
wenches dolled like Vegas showgirls-
greasepaint faces under New-Year's cold.
Banjo strummers grin like banshees.
Silver-suit glitter, golden slippers.

They practice under highways,
abandoned building lots,
church basements,
and go broke on costume,
working extra jobs along Two Street.
The prize money never covers expenses.

They do it for the show off,
the neighborhood bliss,
the four and a half minutes
to beat Aqua, Duffy, Uptown,
Quaker City, Tilby, Ferko.

This Is Just To Say

I used the bullets you gave me
to shoot the horses,
and the hatchet to chop them up--
otherwise the sled dogs would have starved.
Yesterday morning, the stream didn't hold;
while retrieving water,
I imagined the snow cave
your body creates
beneath the blue sheets,
and fell through the ice.
O, how I ache
with the ability
to keep you warm,
as I persist here alone,
your faithful outpost.

Baise-Moi

Expecting someone else,
her hair a rumpled mess,
she meets me at the door
in the short, silk nightdress
she'd been sleeping in.
My breath taken away,
unsteady on my feet
from what I had been drinking,
I stepped back.
It was not what I was there for--
yet, I could not help
taking her in my arms,
at first to feel the silk,
the small of her back,
then her bare shoulders,
and to kiss those lips
I had always wondered
what it would be like to kiss.