

It Was a Small Town and the Only Theft was a Blanket

I take the first taste of bourbon for the night,
like the first taste of bourbon I ever took,
and it tastes the same.

I look at the pork-chop photo on the Safeway matchbook,
and she is reading Knut Hamsun, reading Hunger.
She's at Hamsun's house, he's leaning close,
straight from his once-living soul.

She holds the book in her hand, up behind the binding,
her fingers over the top, like she's his favorite niece,
and he's taking her on their favorite stroll.

She holds the book, it holds her hand, it's thick
and paper pale white, like the old man's hand.

They are walking in Cristiana, before it became Oslo.

She has that peace on her face,
like a young woman who's being told things,
not like a girl's told, not like a woman's told.

She's absorbing the story, like the warmth of her hand
warms the old man's hand, like the thin lines of her palm
touch at many places the higher edges of small pulp
in the page, like the sensitive skin of her fingertips
edges across the rough folds of his aging hand.

I tap a winston from the pack and pull a match
from behind the porkchop photograph.

What are you writing about, she asks.
You, I answer, and she smiles,

As she and Hamsun turn the corner,
at the bushes, on the walk, near the wall,
in the garden, off the street, in Cristiana,
a century ago.

What Do You Mean, You're Tired of Poetry?

She is one of those girls who gets in everywhere,
because someone falls for her and invites her along.

She ends up standing around the recording studio,
art studio, studio apartment, cocktail party.

Tonight, she chose the high-priced popcorn,
without the money for it, because she knew.

The grocer said, *Sure, for a pretty girl like you.*
I said I resented that, my empathetic identification
with the desire, with the long line, witness to the one
who steps in upfront, easily granted front-row seats.

Not that I wouldn't do the same in her place,
but who's in her place? I am, from time to time.

She, White Goddess, Jewish Princess, Rockefeller,
Hollywood Sex Queen, Ruling Elite, Darling of the Media.

I said I felt foolish putting my arm around her
and smiling happily. Anyone would do the same,
who didn't plant a knife between her identical ribs.

In fact, she has a crooked rib cage,
blood in her veins, and a soul.

Still, she says she's tired of poetry,
and wants, expects, more for me.

More? More than poetry?

She Warms Me More Than Bourbon

I went to the store and bought a bottle of Cream of Kentucky
and a pack of Fruit-Flavor Care-Free Sugarless Gum.
Now, everyone has his little treat, and we're set for the evening.

She, with eyes that seem to have cried,
and I, with sunned face, that has cried at times.

I played ball this afternoon with the Black teenagers,
who call themselves Nigger-Chink and Honkey-Nigger,
double-clutching and slam-dunking their way into adulthood.

Burn him! the watchers whispered to the boy who guarded me.

She stayed home and wondered, as she lemon-oiled the house
for the visit of her mother, why she felt like crying.

*I touch certain parts of your body with such urgency.
Your love is like a curling iron in my stomach.*

My heart kept beating faster and faster.
I thought, *I'm going to die, at 4:30,*
on a basketball court on a Sunday afternoon,
but I couldn't be dying, it felt so good.

Her gum is smacking and crackling and juicing up her tongue.
My bourbon is sloshing and slurping and warming up my throat.

The kid never did burn me, he just shot good.
Anyone with skill and love of the game is not to be denied.

Ne Se Voit Pas Sur Le Visage (It Can't Be Seen On The Surface)

*I guess things are going well,
if we can sit here, with nothing to say, she said.
Both of us with eyes full of grief, bursting with silence.*

She put another layer of red on her
already burdened fingernails. They gleamed.
She painted the undersides, and cleaned
the edges with a letter opener.

She wrote her mother, sending her
helicopter photos of the beach,
glancing wistfully at me, the talker,
just as the poet, Vallejo, warned me,
*And what if, after so many words,
the word itself doesn't survive?
Don't say a word.*

I could feel the next hour in the room
as if it were a sky for birds to rendezvous.

All day long, I had repeated the phrase,
Ne se voit pas sur le visage, lines
from a can of French talcum powder,
as if its meaning were unknown.

*Toss that talc in the air, right now, I thought,
and watch it cling to the unspoken words.*

She sat at the table mumbling about various movies
not nominated for an Oscar. Who'd give one for this
pent-up drama? Whoever finds the key that unlocks
the tongue, unleashes the mystery of silence.

I had lost those silent years, opening door after door.

I wish she would speak, I thought.

I will speak, I said, I will speak.

She Lay On Me Like A Dentist's Lead Vest

She lay on my chest, like a dentist's lead vest,
while I x-rayed my thoughts about the young poet
I'd heard read her poet's lament. She might have said,
in sum, *A heavy thing, the sense trip. It's like scary.*

The muscles in my neck tensed each time
she entered the room, or my children did,
or anyone.

An evening of intercourse ahead,
and barely a tenth of it sexual.

We had cleared away the deadening habits,
and unfettered life loomed like a spider's web.
We had passed the disputes that weed out the distrust,
and a gaping possibility wandered our rooms.

What if I had all the time and all the love?

At the home of friends, I read and talked,
and assumed them to be the center of possibility.
In my own house, I couldn't believe I was enough.
I seemed all responder, my activity frivolous.
I could not recognize the simple beauty
of presence I was inside of.

I longed to be alone again, in the presence
of remarkable others, distant from my innards.

I loved a woman I was afraid to lose.
I lost her nightly for the fact of her.

Daydreams And Suicide

She didn't mention suicide, but it showed up
when she said she believed in nothing.

Love and death were on her mind, the one in the other.
She hadn't been living up to her stature, lately.

There was a tender fear in her eyes,
as she lifted the prayer plant from its basket
and set about to trim it, perfectly.

Those traits she found herself
taking from her mother were
the very ones she found to criticize.

*Everyone is suicidal, she said,
but not everyone daydreams.*

She imagined a torrent of cloth in a box,
free of mildew, next to the sink.

I could smell the cloth.

The Same In The Lord's Eyes

Nanci and I went to the Chinese Cultural Center to see her boss' Christian band perform.

He and his wife, their pastor, and all their friends were thrilled to see her and me, a real coup.

It reminded me of the good old days of my religion, as president of the Junior Methodist Youth Fellowship, feeling the calm, peaceful arrogance of being the same in the Lord's eyes, all the boys were handsome, all the girls were beautiful.

The giant, illuminated-from-behind cross had a small pull-chain hanging at the bottom.

I was uncomfortable and cautious, knowing their happy designs on my soul, until the initial fear of salvation, rich with magic, power, and promise, wore off, in the half-light of cynical bliss.

*We know what we can't explain,
what you can't explain away,
what you can't deny, because you
don't know, the Bible tells us so.*

The wife was embarrassed, as I thumbed through her illustrated Good Book.

*It's so messy, she said.
It was made to be used, I said.*

Our pastor startled us at a tender age. He told us to write in the margins, aiding in the downfall of perfect wisdom.

Every song was introduced with
the marvelous wonder of its miracle.

*It was so easy. Arlene wrote the words,
and God wrote the music right out of me.
I cried for hours.*

Then the result, dull, derivative,
repetitive, simple, without eloquence.

The guitarist was manic and brilliant.
A total nonbeliever, Nanci said,
and those nearby laughed in surprise.
They knew how hard he tried to believe.

He had the gift of music.
Self-effacing and awkward,
he said, *Praise God, OK?*

One of the singers, the chubby, blond,
minister's wife, knew the truth, that
everyone of us believes in the Lord,
because whenever we fall off a cliff,
we shout, *Oh, my God!*

I began to suspect a plot.
I was the prey to be prayed for,
the lost lamb to be lured back to the fold.
Here little sinner. Nice little sinner.

One woman knew Satan's tricks.
Her car battery had gone dead.
Neglect was not to blame.
Satan loves to trip up the faithful.

The people were very nice.
Little kids played on the balcony.

Babies murmured in their mothers' arms.
People shook hands with sincerity.

I was not moved to cry out, to love or despise
the mockery of faith's arduous achievement.

If Bushmen can feel colors and
Portuguese sense ships miles at sea,
we city faithful must struggle
to praise spirit with our effort.

I thought of those I most admired,
dismissed because they were not saved.

At the end, the pastor spoke of the nun raped in Oakland,
and called for the dead among us to be born.

Then, when I expected him to say, *Go with God*,
he barked out, *Dismissed. OK, you're all dismissed.*

Irish New Year

Michael, the bartender at The Little Shamrock, sits beside me on the narrow ledge, halfway up the wall, our feet on the furniture, St. Patrick's Day night, witness to the crush of drunkenness.

He talks about flying, Vietnam, his sense of performing behind the bar, and history. The Little Shamrock is owned by Arabs. The old photographs on the wall are like decorations, but they're not.

He says, *This place is eighty years of history. It's an Irish bar. It needs my Irish ownership. It needs to stay alive.*

Michael's exuberance is almost painful. His wife, he says, understands him. She lets him do what he wants, women, the implication. Her hands are arthritic. A pretty woman, she suffers, some way, his suffering.

He demands to get behind the bar on his night off, this night of the drunken Irishmen. I give him a ten dollar bill, and he gives me eleven change, and the next Bass, he says, is on him.

I watch the revelry. There is no joy in it. Until, at One, a melding occurs, and for an hour, everyone knows everyone, to kiss and laugh, to move about as if there is a history and not merely an hysteria.

For an hour, at the end of the night,

it is the end of the world. Eyes meet eyes,
after all these hours, when names are spoken,
not to be remembered.

Katie, the waitress, sidles up to me
and hides her face against my chest,
acquiesces to holding and being held.

It takes so much drinking, so long a time,
for us to come together, under St. Paddy's blessing.

And when we do, the morning after, we forget.
We call it a hangover. We think what's missing
is curable with vitamins and a run in the park.

Michael twirls pint glasses in the air,
points to me, and says, *My friend, this one's on me.*

Dyin' Crapshooter's Blues

Some will plant a seed in your brain.
It's best to notice the root as it begins to insinuate.

The man said, *Poets should never marry, never have a straight gig.*

He sat in his cab, dead broke, thousands in debt.
Out of the Sheridan came a jeweled and well-shod
man in a three-hundred dollar powder-blue suit.
As he got into his powder-blue Lincoln, my friend thought,

*I'm thirty-five years old, I've written three novels,
one play, and four books of poems, and one of us
is a winner, and the other is a loser, pick one.*

*If my novel is rejected again,
I'm going to stop asking permission to live,
FUCK YOU is going to be my emblem,
I'm going to look at life and say,
'Take this job and shove it,'
I'm going to take twelve black beauties,
drink a beer, and say, 'I quit.'*

This man, who prides himself in his
sometimes almost maniacal optimism,
who knows the salvation of laughter,
who had me laughing at his tale of woe,
has left me with my brain in knots.

*It's a good thing you love what you do,
he said, because no one else gives a fuck.*

Well, some do and some don't,
and breakthroughs feel like breakdowns,
and maybe he can quit, and maybe he can't.

I had no advice to give, except to shake his hand,
when he only intended to drop a quick wave at me.

*Eight years of busting my balls writing,
and maybe it's just something I failed at.*

He bumped a chair, making a raggedy exit.
The guy in the john outside the car game,
asked him what he'd bet. *My marriage*, he said.

*All hell is breaking loose,
or breaking loose is all hell, I think,
and try to save my own soul, sitting
in the cafe, across from an empty chair,
a small, cyclonic image dancing in front of me,
like a beautiful woman with a black heart.*

*Come dance with me. You know I'm right.
But, being right doesn't make it right.*

And as my cousin used to say,
*That's not what I'm looking for,
that's what I'm looking at.*

Even so, I can't absolve the lingering,
destructive temptation of apocalypse.

My friend had words for it,
*They should take my picture
and put it up wherever gamblers are.
'This is the guy you are looking for.
A born loser.'*

I felt as if I contributed to his downfall,
simply because I understood what he meant,
and when he passed by the cafe window,
my right arm flinched to make a sign,
without any idea how to complete it.

Drummers' Duet

Rolling down Bush Street, in the right lane,
the brakes went out on the car.

I said, *The brakes have gone out.*
Peter thought it was a joke, at first.
Then, *Put it in low! Put it in low!*
I did! I said.

A car without brakes is leaping before you look,
and he who is lost, thinks only of hesitating.

Ahead, the light turned red,
and the Toyota, in front, stopped.

I saw not enough space between it and a parked car.
Somehow, the dead rolling box slipped through.

I thought of Hobson's Choice,
not *Will I hit something?* but *What will I hit?*

Turn left! Peter said, and I wheeled left,
across the one-way, in front of the two rows
of stopped cars, and came to a rest at the curb.

Good driving, Peter said. *Good advice,* I said.
Our hearts were a drummers' duet.

I tried to park the car, but I couldn't control the roll.
We slammed into a large pipe against a wall.
Peter jumped out to apologize to the old man
whose house we shook. He smiled at our good luck,
our close call, and the paint chipped off his plumbing.

Adrenalin pumping, we strode two miles home.

*We owe one to the gods, he said.
God must love us pagans, I said.*

We catalogued the worst that did not occur.
A mini-mobile earthquake had rattled our bones,
and set a convulsive, contrary wave in our blood.

An apprehensive mask spread across my face.
I dumb-walked through the rest of the day.

What did not happen, with its irresolution,
infected me with a watchfulness.

I was inclined to read Thomas Hardy,
and think of the divinity of the ordinary.

The darkest foreboding creeps in,
when life is cracked open,
and mute beauty is its only fulfillment.

A Woman With Grace

There is a woman in the cafe
with one hand missing,
covered by a long, green sleeve.

I've been watching her and not watching,
working on a cold acceptance, unpitying her,
imagining making love, the feeling of her blunt
arm against my back skin, my muscles jumping,
under the soft-touch blow.

I chastise myself
for not knowing how to think of her,
as if I should know, or should think anything,

I think about the remarkable and the noticeable,
not knowing.

While I am waiting in line for a glass of wine,
I see a poster tacked to the wall, I wince, it reads,
*We're Stumping for the Coming Revolution
in Higher Consciousness*, and above it,
the grinning face of Elizabeth Clare Prophet,
a pseudonym for squeaky clean, uncrippled
freedom from awkward thought.

I think of the grace that accrues
to the damaged and the wounded.

She holds her book bag on the crook
of an unseen wrist, as if her missing hand
is sunk deep in her pocket.

I love her graceful accomodation with disaster.
No wonder I treat it as if it is nothing.

Then, I think the missing hand is a guard let down.
God has unprotected her, and that unprotects me.

I am awed by the power
I might have and the uses I might be.

She does not need me, she is more
than a broken-wing sparrow, she is
independent as everyone I admire is.

Which one reveals the other wounds?
Which one shines with other grace?

That is the higher consciousness
I would stump for. The word pains me.

Let it stand.

Isabel Keats

When Isabel Keats was eighteen, in Louisville, Kentucky, October 29, 1843, she shot herself.

She was the niece of the poet John Keats, and everybody said she resembled him.

The editor of the local paper, a man twice her age a mediocre poet, composed a rhyme to her glory, comparing her fire to her famous uncle's and described how that fire had consumed Keats, then called her to its power.

Two nights before Halloween, on the anniversary of her uncle's birthday, the family gathered.

The boys came in from hunting, and John Henry left his gun on or near the sofa, where it remained.

Isabel was her convivial self as dinner passed into evening. Guests came and went, until at Ten, everyone went to bed.

A short time later, Isabel came downstairs in search of a remedy for a toothache. Soon, the household was shaken by a gunshot.

Her mother entered the room to find Isabel lying wounded on the couch, with the gun nearby.

Georgiana implored of Isabel, *Why did you do it?*
Isabel answered, *Mother, I did not mean to.*

She survived for several hours, finally expired, despite the best medical help, from a weltering of blood from the blast, that had caught her in the neck and chest.

She was said to pass calmly,
in the presence of her loving family.

If there is an explanation
for this death, it is not known.

It was common, in those days,
to attribute dying to a temperament of spirit.
In our day, dying of spirit is anathema.
Only weakness or fault can explain it.

Perhaps she tripped on the weapon in the dark.

No blame can be put on the brother, no blame but stupidity.
No blame can be put on the editor, no blame but romance.
No blame can be put on the poet, no blame but genius.

John Keats, his mother, and both his brothers
died of consumption, as did one-fourth of London,
no blame but God and his illnesses.

Isabel, why did you do it?
Mother, I did not mean to.

The Walk of Fame

Los Angeles is a beautiful woman with emphysema,
the alley behind a magician's tent, a desert town, a neon oasis.

EAT HERE! DINE HERE! BEER, BURGERS & BOOZE!

Only the Extremely Beautiful Need Apply.
There is no life east of the beach, they say.

Take the names of famous faces, embed
them in the sidewalk, and walk on them.

Los Angeles is not a dream, not a dream come true,
but a dream of dreams, the truth gone dreamy.

LA is a plain face, with good bones, done to a turn,
sunbleached, browned, talent-tuned, coached,
coaxed, defined, made divine, visually soothing,
designed to caress the tendrils of the eye.

Rage is suppressed, compressed, glossed over,
forgotten but not gone. The smog is called
all the good ideas, unused.

I did not feel poor or envious or outraged,
driving a beat-up VW in Beverly Hills,
but, in the LA bus station, I felt it.

You're on your own in this great land.
It's great when things are going great.
If not, it is shiftless, drifting, disconnected,
self-pitying, a miserably alone country,
a suspicious, anxious, no-home country.

There are good people, but the people
are no damn good, and why should they be?

The nobles sit in their castles and imagine
that everyone outside wants in.

The coffers are filled,
built on the manufacture
of tiny fiefdoms, pre-fab kingdoms,
everyman's home his domain, with court jesters,
travelling troupes of jugglers and players,
reproduced without flesh and blood,
aristocracy for the masses.

Look, but don't touch. Touch, but don't own.
Own, but don't keep. The best of everything
once removed.

The sign in the bar says,
NO DANCING WITHOUT A PERMIT!

The freedom we are left with is the freedom to think
we are free. It is the only freedom demanded of us.

What price dreams of glory but fears of ignominy?

I'm on my way again, on the road again, I had a good time,
I marvel at the human race, I pretend to figure it out.

In the supermarket, I stole glances at the women.
I felt like a thief, sampling the merchandise.

If appearance is of value, it's for sale, the price is belief,
those not beautiful are expendable, they represent the truth
about the Walled City of Dreams, it has no wall.

The theatre is swarming with people, something cracks
in the imagination, every day is the day of the locust,
beauty has fallen, is swarmed over, the flesh devoured,
every room ransacked, there is not enough room
or finery in the real castle, not enough bread to eat.

If bread is the food for souls, let them eat a donut.
In the bus station, for a quarter, you can watch TV,
and you still have to watch the commercials.
See what you can have. See what you can't have.
Have you been to LA? No, but I saw it on TV.
Then stay home. You've been there.

It's easy to be one-sided. I'm free, am I not,
to say what I think, to think what I feel?

It's like carrying a whisper into a cacophony.

The bus passes a valley,
like thousands of others,
but this one is called Paradise Valley.
Here, it is a deception anyone can see.
Several hundred mobile homes
cover the valley floor.

All the valleys not called Paradise
are startlingly beautiful, not for sale,
of no use, arid, fertile, and alive.

No name need remind me of their beauty.

The Relentless Gaze

Every story I tell is a song
to the end of stories.

A man I know by exchange of empathy,
a temptation to nothingness, stopped by
to tell me he can no longer imagine
any desire for anything.

He disclaims suicide.
Even his curiosity is shaken down.

When I came back with the coffee, he was gone.

After these years in occasions of conversation,
I don't know his name, Tom or John, I think.
He said he's too frightened to be a poet.

I saw no fear in the man, only courage
without eyelids, only strength without dreams.

She Reminds Me Of Things

She buys a cup of coffee and sits down.
She sets her chair back from the wall,
and sits on the edge of it.

She begins her recline, until her head,
with two bunches of hair tied at the back,
like horns in repose, is within inches of my knee.

She holds her book up to her nose and giggles,
like squirting water from a toy pistol in the air.

This is not a desperately lonely being.
This is someone, like an oil leak,
who spreads herself across the floor,
and makes human contact greasy.

She wears white and yellow, cheerful camouflage.
She takes her giant bag up to the counter
when she goes for a refill, and returns.

Her arms begin to waggle in all reachable space,
like sunflowers in a high wind, like finger cactus
in a slow-motion search for the sun.

She moans like a baby seal whose mother may be dead.

She is reading A Tree Grows in Brooklyn,
and it reminds me of the uselessness
to which writing can come.

Nurse

She has the soft body of a nurse, dusty clean,
orderly clothing, the eyes of one who once
loved animals and hated bloody abuse.

She's tired of waiting for doctors,
who act like petulant children,
to grow into manly compassion,
tired of waiting on patients
to die or fight for life.

She's worn down by the percentages,
a few degrees of wonder in a great many
have not added up to a profession of caring.

She is losing faith in work
that seemed to be grounded in it.

Now she sits alone with coffee
and reads the paper, absentmindedly.

Hope and cancer spring
endlessly in the human body.

A tiny, pretty amulet at the neck
is all that's left of her dreams.

The reward for nursing
is too private, too much a wisdom,
to be of any use to one who works
for salary in a virulent, half-sterile
debauchery of vitality called Hospital.

When Language Was Foreign

When meaning was a mirror,
the image was startling,

When others were a mystery
that needed to be known,

The body was the earth that
shook in subtle convulsion.

Before everything
came to be possible,

When being was a fire-storm,
blood coalesced in the muscles,

Made a cry in the throat
that cracked the air.

It has all come back,
piecemeal, since then.

Nothing has changed.

To Exemplify

Whenever he acts
unconscious of propriety,

His lover loves him more,
his thin acquaintances drop off
like sheets of ice in a thaw,

His good friends rally
to a more human question,

His mind became organic,
anarchic, sensible.

Despair became no worse
than part of the truth.

Without the romance
that imbues the frightened
into extremes of constraint
and dreams of escape,

Living is beheld, close to what life is,
and not what is imagined in airless rooms
of alternating desire and dispute.

Instant Attraction

I saw an older lesbian's sweet, careful head turned
by the entrance of one younger, tough and striding.

She looked, then not-looked, then thought better.
She turned reminiscent, or absent. She busied herself
with the newspaper, and waiting, wiped her glasses,
then chewed her salad.

What's to be done, but to hold her broken
eye-glass frame and work ill-fitted dentures
and think, until thinking finds a distraction
that might hold?

One Who Cannot

Her lips are not warm with welcome,
but blistered and sticky with regret.

Her hair is wild and wiry,
her breath half-rancid with conceit.

She is not an imagined forgetting,
but another, in foment, still begetting.

She is wanting to be alone,
and accident has led us together,
not wanting to give away what will
be welcome one day, now too soon.

She wants a certain pain,
a cruelty in time of passage,
a misery that stands for growing,
a fasting that wants a starving, when food,
even that which love desires, is too near at hand.

Anger is the reward, when want is fulfilled,
before the knowing's known has seen its face,
boned of ease, of grace, and gaunt.

Chronicles of Disaster

When each new insult comes out,
all the old insults come out to meet it,
in a chorus, full-throated, struck deep,
broad and lasting, a lifetime of insults,
reverberating, orchestrated, liberated
into the heart, lungs, then the tongue,
scalpel avenger, sensor of disease,
slices a wound, meant for cure, cuts
a wide swathe in the body politic, or
insinuates the muscles of one, well
or ill-chosen for revenge and spreads
the hatred, unsterilized, into others.

For every nurse of the heart,
there are a dozen doctors of blood.

We'd be good if we added only insult to insult,
but injury has a way of demanding residence
where kindness has been evicted.

Street Wise

I am permeated by an unaccustomed
sense of well-being, a peacefulness,
in the midst of a warring climate.

This time the eye of the hurricane
is not an emptiness at the center
of turbulence, but a calm.

It is an identification, in the senses,
with all that does not feel its senses.

I think to make some metaphor of the street,
yet, the sense is not of the street, but of the ease
and warmth of the blooded animal that walks in it.

I am that man who breathes, whose heart holds
the limbs in embrace, unbroken by thought.

All at once, in moving, I am still.

That Which Is Offensive In My Sight

One small lash curls inward and brushes my right eye,
an annoyance, now that I know it's a wayward hair,
and not the delicate play of melancholy.

I sit in the cafe and imagine ways to pluck it.
I wonder if anyone has a tweezers, but who to ask?

Without wanting to, I imagine slashing it with a razor,
but the blade slips in the mind and cuts a gash across
the egg-white eyeball, I wince and blink, the hair plays
at the ridge of the imagined cut.

As it seals, I tell myself, *Forget the sad slip in
the mind's eye, and get rid of the damned hair.*

Standing On Fishes

My friend, Peter, who I always thought was another swimmer, declared he'd rather have been a wrestler or a gymnast.

Instead, he swam, because he liked the coach. *I've always had trouble with authority*, he said.

Of course, I thought, his wiry compression, explosive temperament, a grappling wrestler, or a bounding gymnast, but not a supple, half-drowner like me.

He would not take instruction inside his capability. He grew to despise the water, but then, so did I, after five years. Five years of wrestling the water, bounding across it like a stone.

It took many more years to sink, to take the chance of dissolving,

To stand up on myself,
like Jesus upon the fishes.

Extreme Faces

My fingers graze the edges of things,
like the bullfighter's sense of the horns.

Millimeters between grace and death,
I almost spill glasses, not quite knock over chairs.

I'm amazed, as the muscles guide the bones,
to know the extremities of skin and flesh,

To dance across the edges, to slice
the edge like a razor, like racing wheels
that drop a cup of earth on the rocks below,
the beach, where the birds and the fish
meet with men and women, with men
and women and the birds and the fish,

And the sprinkling dirt
like a hint of rain.

The Lovely Texture Of The Visible World

The lemon seed,
in the glass of sparkling water,
with silver bubbles clinging to it,
like barnacles of mercury,
sinks to the bottom, touches,
and rises to the surface,
loses a few bubbles,
and sinks again.

Any tender obstruction
sends it to the top or blocks its rise.
The pulpy underside of the lemon wedge
is a crystal garden of bubbles.

I want another word for bubble,
a word in another language,
that means too many things
to be translated *bubble*.

I drink the water
and return to my reading.

The Queen of the Rhumba

The poet reading his poems has a nice voice
but no presence to overcome the bus going by,
the door opening, the telephone that rings,
and the giggles from the kitchen.

Each poem's title is written in that nice way
that turns our ordinary place lives into
quintessence and melody, but fails to deliver
any spoken feeling or any feeling well-spoken.

Each poem, like prelude, stops, then nothing opens.

He drives into a town, drives into another town,
enters another, approaches a place where people live,
yet either he never lived there, or keeps silent about it.

The Queen of the Rhumba sits across from me.
Melancholy, she says, *Nothing. Nothing.*

I tried to like his little flowers for an absent lover,

But the Queen of the Rhumba wants to dance,
in the poem and every way that lovers dance.

That Small Delicate Creature

She is worried about losing her childlike female.
She is worried her breasts will disappear.

Every attack against her defense
of that self called loved and loving,
has driven it deeper under the flesh,
to hide by the bones and send out cries.

Home On The Range

You look lower than Perseus,
the old bus shouter said to me,

Himself, looking for all the world
like a caring, cajoling Dutch uncle.

Well, not that bad, he said,
You have a good day, now. OK?

Dear Susy, When I was back home,
I felt isolated, but never lonely.

Here, I do not feel isolated,
but loneliness is everywhere.

A book is a companion.
Friends will see me, early next week.

The kids come on the weekend.
A movie from Brazil has a warm glow.

A woman wrote her number on my chest. It faded.
Paul's long poem stirred me. It made me jump.

I have my favorite table at the cafe.

Home is where the heart is,
where there is a home for the heart.

To Hold On For Dear Life

It's odd how thick and cruddy
most of the time is, parts of which
we notice as poetry, not out of being
thick and cruddy ourselves,
or themselves, as the case may be,

But occasionally, a thin ray spade of light
comes slicing through or out of the silt.

Not that anybody has a handle on it,
but that it has a handle in it for us
to grab, and we can't but help ourselves,
to take it in hand, and hold onto it
for dear life.

Astounded by the Forces at Work

Inside my imagination, all wars,
all great loves, murder and compassion.

An embrace, that ends in strangulation,
changes to tenderness, like a breath
of air on the tendrils of a leaf.

I'm not surprised that all this happens.
I know, by now, that all this happens.

What surprises me is more
like an accident of fear.

What if it's more than me,
which it is, and like a great pouring
into a small vessel, the vessel is broken,
and only in my ambitious idealization,
is the vessel broken into spirit,
and made clear, and not like clay,
into pieces of earthenware?

They're Playing Someone's Kind Of Music

I am being called to Good,
a difficult utopia of will,

To throw off my friendship
with the weak, the foolish, the failed,

To join with the born again, the strong,
the virtuous, the intentional, the reformers,
those who've lost patience with blame,
misunderstanding, and base stupidity.

How can I admit to them, to myself, that
I have no intention greater than embrace?

I have no more intention to save myself
than I have to save the world.

Because I am raw of heart and mind, unformed,
I'll have no sure throw with the dice of Heaven,
or Hell's likewise cast of purity.

I Took James Wright Off The Shelf The Day Before He Died

For years, I've remembered the words I said
in the writers' workshop in Folsom Prison.

I was behind bars, afraid the guards would say,
Wait, we recognize you. You can't leave.

I chain-smoked until the man next to me
counted the butts in the can with a sharp pencil.

Silent and kind, he grinned as he put the pencil down.

I said, to those men, incarcerated for years, for life,
Joy is profound as sorrow. Yet I cultivated sorrow.

For years, I feared prison. The door swings shut.
You cannot run. From now on, nothing changes,
for years, for life. And I longed for it, the frenzy
over, slow time begins. The time for joy.

The Poet From The Poetry

Yeats is all in his poems, despite his
inherent achievement of universality.
Keats is more.

Despite all we know of Yeats,
father, mother, lovers, and Ireland,
he has manufactured himself in his verse.

Keats did not.

For all that Yeats was,
there is only the poetry,
magnificent and wise.

Keats bled better.

One lived to a greater age,
the other aged to a greater life.
One created strength, the other fell.

How can we tell the poet from the poetry?
Where is the virtue in saying, *Here it is, on the page?*

Where's the rule for our lives, to make a body of work,
no matter how well, or to make the body a work of soul,
no matter how poorly?

Keats, no less than Yeats, did his work.
Yeats the easier read, less difficult in that difficult way,
managed a survival, wrapped in a widening gyre.

Keats drove down inward, a less symbolic spire,
led a life of allegory, and found, perhaps too soon,
the truth.

If Yeats is a priest, Keats fell from grace,
ran badly a county parish where God came,
curious at one so beautiful.

Take away this Ireland, this Ledaen body,
show me that broken heart, that stature of soul,
that breeds in one so small.

Here, Try This, The Pigs Found It

Poetry is the gourmet cooking of language.

Sometimes, that means raw vegetables
with the dirt still on them.

Overcooking, as in love and anger,
has its delicacy, too, requiring a sauce.

Today's haute cuisine is yesterday's
*What do we do with these things
that came from the ground?*

Poison

She has set herself up,
with black velvet cloth,
roll of wire and cutters,
plastic cups of beads and petals,
and tape measure.

She banged my leg with the leg of her chair.
*Oh, I'm sorry. Was that your leg or the leg
of your chair?*

I looked at my leg, crossed over
the other, no chair leg even close.

She had a giant safety pin in the back
of the brim of her straw hat. She took it off.

She has her purse. Just so.
She has her bag. Just so.
She has her artist's carry-all. Just so.

She took off her tennies and put on her sandals,
and she sits there, staring.

Tiny beads of sweat are forming on her forehead.
She's shaking like a petal in the wind.
She's shaking her head.

It's no damn good. She's all strung out.

The Old Woman With The Twisted Leg

The old woman with the twisted leg
humbles up the street, a thin cane
helps her to make the walking go.

She stays near the walls, past doorways,
by windows like an aquarium fish.

Inside her head, prickled with grey,
wrapped in old silk, she carries some thinking.

She undulates along, some thought
swims like water flows, it makes a life.

Suicide Notes

I see ghosts of past lives.
I see life in the soon to die.

I see God as a poltergeist
of rather special dimensions.

I see myself living a posthumous existence.

Death is a family theme.
Vitality is like signs of life.
Meaning is a pastime before dying.
Everything we do as entertainment is like
playing Baffle until dawn because you're mad at Ed.

The most important life is unanswerable.

As a citizen of this world,
I feel like a vampire of love,
a fraudulent interviewer of loving.

I believe I could be made to believe,
if only I broke out of my dying.

I am dying out of loyalty to the dead.
Death is the camp most occupied.

In the war that surrounds us,
Death is the victor.

I won't be a suicide, I was born to die.
Any attempt to manufacture death
is a worse lie than living ever is.

Fierce Love

There is a point where, when the impulse says,
like dreams show up, *Throw this thing that's available,*
across the room.

It enacts an explosion. The engine blows up.
The same engine, that functions on tiny explosions,
says something, beyond running the wheels.

It rares back and reels across the polite quiet,
an object like a thrown rod, the written word.

Like the chronicles of a poltergeist, it
demands some example of its ambition.

It overturns a table or flings an ashtray,
managing instead of imagining
a fist blow or kiss, a noise, a stupidity,
crude and accurate, without nuance or
gentle attention to the camaraderie
of our shared happy misery.

It is to do something without meaning,
without knowing its meaning, and have
it end up meaning, *I love.*

Tiny Bubbles

My body does not feel ephemeral.
Even my thinking clanks along.

And when I do dance,
and when I have a flight of fancy,
I do not lose ground.

Maybe it's gravity, weighty thought,
or maybe it's the truth.

I read about a man who ate an automobile
piece by piece, over the years.

And if there's any truth to Icarus,
it is that the soul is only a bubble
in a pound of lead.

And when I die, and my soul
ascends to body-busted heaven,
what's left will turn to gold.

Alchemy, thy name is tiny possibility.

The Shirt That Spoke French

Je suis un shirt.
J'aime les pants.

Le belt est un tie that binds.
Avec les shoes et les socks,
nous faisons un pretty sight.

Mais, sans underwear, notre homme
can get pretty cold dans December.
Zut alors! It's nasty quand le wind blows.

Je suis 70% Acrilan,
et les pants 100% Polyester.
Sacre bleu! Mon sleeves sont froid.

Sans le topcoat,
(Ils took it off un long temps ago)
ils ought to freeze his tootsies off.

Mais le guy wearing moi est en amour,
and ils doesn't care. Ils hot all over,
despite le rotten weather.

Le skirt et le blouse
are dans le backseat, already.

Ooh la la! Je guess que je et les pants
will be back there, toute suite.

C'est un grande night pour l'amour,
but not so good for nous accoutrements.

Quel dommage!

Explaining the Unknown

The tide is caused
by a man in a canoe
in the middle of the ocean.

In the Pacific,
it's a man called Ted.

He dips his oar repeatedly
on each side of his boat.

When he pulls his oar,
it causes the tide.

As he does so,
he says, alternately,

*Japan, America,
Japan, America,
Japan, America.*

Daisy, Daisy

I saw two people
riding two bicycles
that was like one.

That's a joke, of course,
but what if I didn't know
about bicycles built for two?

What if it was like shoes?

My Brother's House

I am engulfed in icons in my brother's house.
In a jar with pens and pencils, there is a tuning fork
and nail clippers, silver, musical, silent in his absence.

He has a clock that ticks like a Slinky descending a mountain,
a kerosene lake in the lamp next to the Monet, next to the pennies
forever embedded in a cube, an elbow lamp, hesitant above
the Information Almanac and the Feminine Mystique, next to
the clean, molded plastic sarcophagus of the Martin Guitar, by
a basket fern and the door to an empty closet draped in nylon net,
with paths across the sheepskin-like carpet.

*When Christ was crucified, thousands
were given the same unjust desert,
giving up their lives for something
or someone, if only alone.
No cathedrals were built in their honor,
but sparrows they were, and we are.*

I look around the room and I see names; James Joyce, Claude Monet,
Tastee-Freez, Time-Life, Ronald Reagan, A.L. Rowse, Omar Khayyam,
Pierre-August Renoir, Leave It To Beaver, Henry Adams, and the poet
we heard in the Augustana chapel, Howard Nemerov.

*There are too many of you.
Heaven is closed! The age
of Reason is full up, too.
And we have no more jobs
for Romantic poets. Go*

Go has two imperatives. Go away
and rockets launched, track stars set loose.

My brother is a man of reason, masculine.
I am a man of intuition, feminine.

We contend, my brother and I, as lovers do,
half-believing the other, not quite content in ourselves.

He doesn't understand my anger, violent like a curse.
I don't appreciate his, catalogued like an occupation.

I am objective about my subjectivity, he is
the obverse, and he would say the same of me.

Icons are pleasure objects,
things with meaning beyond fact,
they stroll into our hearts and take possession,
like old and new lovers, like armchairs of the imagination,
like lions and tigers, huge and dangerous,
but attractive as a pillowed sofa.

Alcoholics have a dance.
You never saw one spill a drop,
in a concentration as absolute as Leonardo
painting the hand of God.

I feel as if I have the right to enjoy the generic pizza
in my brother's freezer, but I will not enjoy it to eat it.

Instead, I think we are our brother's keeper,
but that does not make him ours.

Let us keep to ourselves.
The gods of others are not our gods.
But let us not stand alone, it would be ungodly to do so.

The Marigold Turns To Lead

The cafe across the street looks
burned out, closed quickly in anger.

Rumors fly, a fight between partners,
the health inspector, a fire in the back.

Signs, that were up in front only a few days ago, are gone.
Chairs are piled on tables, in the window, a hastily written note,
CLOSED, no explanation.

It's a melodramatic night, bathed in fog, dirty bathwater fog,
and the babies, thrown out with it, have crossed the street
to the cafe called the Cafe des Refugees.

It's a night of foreign intrigue, right for Schnapps
and muted conversation, a murderer's night.

We step up to the darkened windows of the Marigold,
cup our eyes against the glass, then turn, bewildered
and homeless, to catch sight of the Cafe des Refugees.

We cross against the traffic
and step hesitantly to the new door.
We contemplate. We turn away.
There is too much murder in new cities.
We walk in boldly. One place is as good as another.

Do You Love Me Without Qualification

All her life, she hated the pretty girls,
the slim, butt-hard, bra-filling girls,
the ones who got all the attention
and the boys.

She out-lived them in skintone and radiance,
and in her anger, until she turned old and bitter,
equivalent to the unbeautiful she always thought
she was, hating her harsh voice, her thighs,
her size as a big-boned woman.

What do you say to such a woman,
who, all her life, has demanded in every
minute of her life and in the lives around her,
to be loved despite everything, despite
everything that matters, only because
it matters to her?

How can you blame her, when every
prejudice she resented was practiced
on her, when that shallow mistake
was forced into her life, into all our lives?

The Other Side Of The Moon

A guy sits down next to Chris
and tells him they know each other,
but Chris can't remember.

Then his girlfriend comes out
of the back room like a surprise,
sits down next to me, and pushes
my ashtray out of the way.

*You're going to sit next to me
and condemn me for smoking?*

Yes, she says, and now we two,
thrown together by the imagined
bond of the two others, sit in silence,
back to back, uneasy and hostile.

She smiles, when she turns to apologize
for mistaking my coffee cup for hers,
and I like her eyes.

I'm cramped into a chair by the wall,
by an attitude I would grant her, if I
could also grant her the other side of
the room, the other side of the moon.

The man holds out a forkful of lasagna
for her mouth like a spoonful of axle grease
for a baby sparrow, good for the feathers.

The world disintegrates.

How To Diet

First, you drink coffee. Then, you eat a small piece of leftover steak. Then, the other piece. Then, a small salad.

Then, you walk down to the cafe in the snow, and have a piece of coconut cream pie and coffee, because it's a way to learn the neighborhood, then back across Interstate 380 and up Carolina Drive.

Half-famished from the trek, you break out the fiber wafers and cover them with cream cheese and a couple of them with butter.

Minutes pass, and with no reluctance, you take the Totino's Pizza out of the freezer and pop it in the oven.

It's way past 3PM by now, and the pizza should last until dinner.

It's easy.

Pee-ching

A grungy poodle runs around the patio,
smells my braunschweiger and the fresh paint
on my pants, barks at a bush, and runs
into the house, looking for Rosalie.

A miracle.

If it had suddenly begun to fly,
I would have capitalized miracle.

Cough, Groan

Illness is a car
coming up the street,

A curiosity at first,

Made real by the gang
that piles out in your driveway,
shouting and waving,

Before you have time
to pull the curtains
and lock the door.

Its Breathing Was Its Secret

The new cafes of North Beach,
The Roma, The Puccini, and even
the old one, The Trieste,
are difficult children.

My anger at them is forgiving, as it
turns on some forgiveness of myself.

I saw an old man, angry at a painting
of a bass, biting at bait bass don't go for.

Who's to say that with deprivation
and subsequent direction, they wouldn't?

There's too much to say, as often happens,
when the angry demand waits too long.

A boy was dying of cancer, a monster
he described having mouths and noses.

He made a glue gun to stuff the holes,
the monster couldn't breathe, and died.

Now the boy dreams himself a sponge of emotion.
He squeezes dry the hurt and talks to his dad.

I stop breathing, a crib death.

The surprise of anger is that it's not aimed at anyone,
it's aimed at the monster, and if it misses, the baby dies.

I must go back to the small room, talk,
drag the pain out, inhale and exhale forgiveness,
and suffocate the monster I've inspired with my rage.

He Supposed It Was Fear

Emotions were like shells that
fired from the inside out.

Before they reached the surface,
long after the shot was fired,
he could feel the abuse coming,

And then the wound, the explosion,
the inescapable bloody mess on the skin.

It was the moment when something died,
and something, if anything, was born.

On Meeting A Young Woman Who Desires To Counsel The Dying

I have sacrificed my body to palliate my misery,
that follows my thinking like a decrepit angel
who carries along behind my hell-crawling.

Death is winning by degrees. My flesh holds the field.
I make concessions to death, ignoring the count,
until innocence sits near me, and I see how far I am lost.

My stinking breath and puckering flesh mock
what imagined wisdom I think I have gained.

I sleep, I leave the muse behind.
The sound in my mouth is a rattle of teeth.
I remind into other graves. Bleeding fingers
dig into earth like a swimmer. I visit a wall,
against which is hung, stripped, dried
and cured; human emotions.

A poet, not a suicide, at first I lost things,
then forgot chunks of night, too many names and faces,
too much intimacy with strangers, unrelented upon
by this hesitant revolution, its inevitability.

My body began to spend time missing something.
Binding glues, crystallized. If not that, melted.
If not, the unconnectedness declared itself.

I had the same face. The eyes thickened,
filled, as they were, with what does not wash.

I held the same mirror. It seemed smaller.
It, windowed, grew.

A poet, not a suicide,

sees death, calls it death,
sees dying, calls it dying.

Only vision goes past the dying.
Dead eyes see again.

A poet, not a suicide, wants vision,
does not expect to find it in drowning,
drowns.

Looking For Instructions

All day long, I heard talk of doctors.
I felt deranged. I heard stories of intemperance.
I went home, where the gulls came near the house
in a mass of cries.

I drove to the store, toward a mallard,
sitting in the street, and in the mirror,
I saw it sitting, still, unharmed.

The side effect of medicine is worse illness.

Jane Goodall, among the apes,
saw her dreams of grace shattered.
After three generations, they began
to kill each other and eat the babies.

The news came that all the deaths
in the city the last two years,
was actually a decline.

I read a fine man's writing.
I heard a story about lying and cheating.
Then a language dropped out of the sky and said,

*Merry Christmas, little one.
When it all makes sense,
I'll buy you a ring.*

The Cage

Halfway across town, in a movie theatre,
instead of laughing at the comedy,
I grow sad, redfaced and heartsore.

My blood beats in me, I wonder why I am caged,
until I hear your unmistakable cadence.

I am your carrier of feeling.
Cupid has other arrows than love.

The Pearl

Nothing so surprises me, after having gotten used to the aloneness of the body, as the aloneness of the soul.

The soul needs God to protect it from aloneness. Oneness is a truth, even if it is a deception.

Oneness careens around in the mind like good drugs, as true as last night's drunkenness.

Only sobriety destroys the kindness of the illusion. Sobriety is a toxin, as sinful, as adjudicated as the church runs the hiding from God.

There is nothing more terrible than being alone. It is the truth. How beautiful it is to be alone.