

**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.

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, just
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.*

More Than Poetry

She says she's tired of poetry, wants, expects,
more for me. More? More than poetry?

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

The muscles in my neck tense each time she
enters the room, or my children do, or anyone.

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.*

We have cleared away the deadening habits,
and unfettered life looms like a spider's web.

We've passed the disputes that weed out the distrust,
and a gaping possibility wanders our rooms.

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

At the home of friends, I read and talk,
and assume them to be the center of possibility.

In my own house, I can't believe I'm enough.
I seem all responder, my activity frivolous.

Can I recognize the simple
beauty of presence I'm inside of?

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

I love a woman I am afraid to lose.
I lose her nightly for the fact of her.

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 seem 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 AM,
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 has me laughing at his tale of woe, leaves me with my
brain in knots.

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

Well, some do and some don't, and breakthroughs feel like
break-downs, and maybe he can quit, and maybe he can't.
I have no advice to give him, except to shake his hand,
when he only intended to drop a quick wave.

Eight years of busting my balls, he says, and maybe it's just something I failed at. The guy in the john, outside the card game, asked him what he'd bet. *My marriage,* he said. He bumps a chair, as he makes a raggedy exit.

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,* she says.

But, being right doesn't make it right. And, as my cousin said, *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 has 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 contributed to his downfall, because I understand what he means, and when he passes the cafe window, my right arm flinches to make a sign, without any idea how to complete it.

Drummers' Duet

Rolling down Bush Street, in the right lane, the brakes go out on the car. I say, *The brakes have gone out.* My friend thinks it's a joke, at first. *Put it in low!* he says. A car without brakes is leaping before you look, and he who is lost, thinks only of hesitating. Ahead, the light turns red, and the Toyota in front, stops.

I see not-enough-space between it and a parked car. I think of Hobson's Choice, not *Will I hit something?* but *What will I hit?* Somehow, the dead rolling box slips through. *Turn left!* my friend says, and I wheel left, across the one-way, in front of the two rows of stopped cars, and come to a rest at the curb. *Good driving,* he says. *Good advice,* I say. Our hearts are a drummers' duet.

I try to park the car, but I can't control the roll. We slam into a large pipe against a wall. My friend jumps out to apologize to the old man whose house we shake. He smiles at our good luck, our close call, and the paint chipped off his plumbing.

Adrenalin pumping, we stride home. We catalogue the worst that does not occur. *We owe one to the gods,* he says. *God must love us pagans,* I say.

A mini-mobile earthquake rattles my bones, and sets a convulsive, contrary wave in my blood. An apprehensive mask spreads across my face. I dumb-walk through the rest of the day.

What does not happen, with its irresolution,
infects me with a watchfulness. I'm 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.

Standing On Fishes

My friend, 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.

A Woman With Grace

There is a woman in the cafe with one hand missing,
covered by a long, green sleeve. I watch her and not
watch her. I work on a cold acceptance. I unpity her.

I imagine making love, the feeling of her blunt arm
against my back skin. My muscles jump, 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.

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.
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 use I might be.

But she is more than a broken-wing sparrow.
She doesn't need me. She is independent
as everyone I admire is.

I wonder which ones reveal the other wounds?
Which ones shine with other grace?

In Vesuvio

A man in a bar makes a pass at my girlfriend
and spits on me, and I sit quietly for a while.
I feel fear, compassion, and then, nothing.
I think about it, and then thought stops.

I go up to the bar, beside the man, and he
insults me, again. I turn to face him, and a
wide calm engulfs me from within. I reach out,
I grab the man by his shirt-front, and I lift him up.

I slam him hard against the bar, and I tell him to
get out of my face and to never fuck with me again,
and the man is shocked and afraid, and the bartender
comes around, and leads him to the door and kicks
him out, and comes back and thanks me for not hurting
the man, and I am amazed, in my calm, at the purity
of it. There is no anger in it, and no fear,
and no desire, and it is who I am.

I'm glad to meet myself, after wondering
for so many years when and if I would ever show up.

As time goes on, I want to be who I am,
when push comes to shove, when all is said
and done, when being is all there is to be.

I wonder when my true self
might be present all the time,
without waiting for cause to make it so.

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, stops by to tell me
he can no longer imagine any desire for anything.

Even his curiosity is shaken down.
He disclaims suicide.

When I come back with coffee, he is gone.
After years, in occasions of conversation,
I still don't know his name.

He says he's too frightened to be a poet,
but I see no fear in the man, only courage
without eyelids, only strength without dreams.

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 becomes 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.

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.

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.

A Hint Of Rain

My fingers graze the edge 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 edge, 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 and the sprinkling dirt like a hint of rain.

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

Not that we have a handle on it,
but that it has a handle in it for us to grab,
and we can't help but to help ourselves to it,
to take it in hand and to hold on to 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
shattered pieces of earthenware?

I Take James Wright Off The Shelf The Day Before He Dies

In the writers' workshop in Folsom Prison,
I'm behind bars, afraid the guards will say,
Wait, we recognize you. You can't leave.

The assistant warden asks me if I am going to
say or do anything subversive, and I lie to him.
I say, *I'm only going to read some poems.*

I could say, *I bring the inherently subversive
language of poetry with me*, but I don't,
and he looks at me and lets me in,
despite his well-founded suspicions.

Among the inmates, I chain-smoke, until the man
next to me counts the butts in a can with a sharp pencil.
Silent and kind, he grins, as he puts the pencil down.
I nod in wide-eyed agreement.

Somehow, I tell those men, incarcerated
for years, for life, that *Joy is profound as sorrow.*

In that group of hardened criminals, I say words
I can't prove by my example, and those convicted men
hold me to my promise by letting me go on in my life,
without contradiction.

Yet, I cultivate sorrow. And for years, I fear prison.
The door swings shut, I cannot run. From now on,
nothing changes, for years, for life. And I long for it,
the frenzy over, slow time begins, the time for joy.

The Poet From The Poetry

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, does his work.
Yeats manages a survival, wrapped in a widening gyre.
Keats drives down inward, a less symbolic spire.
He finds, perhaps too soon, the truth.

If Yeats is a priest, Keats falls from grace,
runs badly a county parish where God comes,
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.

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 someone.

The most important life is unanswerable.
As a citizen of this world, I'm a vampire of love,
a fraudulent interviewer of loving. I believe
I can love, if only I break 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.

Tiny Bubbles

My body does not feel ephemeral.
Even my thinking clanks along. And when
I do dance, and when I do 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 truth to Icarus, it is that
the soul is a tiny 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.

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.

On Meeting A Young Woman Who Desires To Counsel the Dying

I sacrifice my body, that follows my thinking
like a decrepit angel who carries along behind
my hell-crawling. 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've gained.

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, they melted,
if not that, the unconnectedness declared itself.

I had the same face, the eyes thickened, they filled
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.
I didn't expect to find it in drowning,
I drowned.

The Pearl

After having gotten used to the aloneness of the body,
nothing so surprised me as the aloneness of the soul.

The mind 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.

A Quiet Fathering

There is a quiet fathering in the wilderness.
It says, *Step here, if it is your wish to walk
half-drunk off the edge of the world,
you'll see no tears, hear no cries.*

*Your bones break, the branches break, you die,
but here, inside your miserable skin, you may cry
all you like and, listen, half the city cries.
There are tears to fill a dozen rivers.*

I sit at my table in my room and weep,
I alternate weeping with rage, I try to find
these things in a tree, I look under a rock,
I search the skies, I find no tears.

Memorial Day Prayer

I want you to dig hands in my flesh,
grab great hunks of muscle and twist,
dip fingers in my blood and reverse the flow,
stir me like a pole in butter, pull my limbs
like a wet towel from the sink and squeeze out
the filth of old pain. I want clean muscles,
clean bones, clean blood.

My body is a rug with paths of abuse worn in,
with grime of neglect and denial ground in the pile.

I am in need of cleansing, wringer cleansing,
sun in the backyard beating. I am furniture sat on,
sat in, damaged by too many cigarette burns, stains,
vandal slices, vomit. I have taken into my shape
the shapes of hurt and damage.

A human repository of ghosts and demons,
I need exorcising, like a house, good in the wood,
strong in foundation, beautiful in structure, full
of history and use, open to your love, but tormented
with spectors that bang my doors, darken my windows,
and inhabit my rooms without right.

I want to move unafraid down every passageway
from attic to cellar, and see the pain, name the pain,
give succor to the pain, and have it be gone.

Be gone from my muscle, gone from my bone,
gone from my blood, gone from my breath,

So that love can take up complete residence,
and know that I am its home, that none other
can own me, none other can live in me
and call itself proprietor, so that my heart
is love's home, and I am home in my heart,

I have been a house of death,
and the dead belong in the ground.

Tie His Hands And Cover His Eyes

There is no thrill matches standing facing
the absolute end, thinking beyond thinking,
accepting that which is beyond acceptance
in any vocabulary.

Here, at the brink of absolute end,
no waiting room, no late dues,
no free holiday, no second go round.

Nothing so stirs vitality as does the end.
The end. Don't be afraid, be excited.

Can this be other than being at the nearest
neurons of God's experience, this, God's life?

Shall I tie His hands and cover His eyes?

Lying On Time Like A Hawk

I'm tired without someone to love,
running on God, and it isn't enough,

Seeing God in everything, everyone,
all action, light, and sun,

Lying in the back of a pickup truck on 580,
watching a hawk, lying on the wind in the hills,

Scratching a cute dog, stance like a young
deer, face like a wise, sad, old man,

Loving my work, my coworkers,
friends, faces, ideas, memories,

Lying on time like a hawk, circling,
no fear, no hatred, my eyes on
tiny creature details,

The hawk is love *of* the air,
the hawk is love *in* the air,

I look at my hands, conscious of
the love in them. I am love in them.

I am all the things I say, and I am
tired, without someone to love,
strong as a young deer,
face like a wise, sad, old man,
circling the details, running on God
and the heat and the light of the sun.

Flash Rain

The agitation that comes on a man
in the presence of a woman blessed
with remarkable beauty would never
do to win the heart of one of love.

No imagination of the excitable satisfies.

Flash rain never soaked
the soil or the soul.

In Splendid Isolation

In splendid isolation, the world opens up
like the fashion of a time turned timeless.

I love her breasts on my chest,
her kiss when she kisses me.

I want to touch every tiny muscle on her body
and her not-muscles too, beautiful blue green eyes,
like bluegreen, beautiful eyes.

I love it, she says, when you engulf me.
Damn, how great was her language.

Do you know ritual? she asks, as we walk
around the lake, one recent sunny day.

*Watch this, I say, I would rather throw
this apple far out into the lake than eat it,
even though it is good.*

So she throws her apple, too.

Geese have teeth, or a metatarsil ridge,
in their grabby, little long mouths.

The Eternal Ruse

I want you to be mine, and I want to be yours,
and every time I say that, I want us to laugh
at our little ruse.

I want us to merge into one, and every time
I say that, I want us to laugh at our little ruse.

I want us to walk down Paris boulevards
and forget who we are and what we're doing
and where we're going, and then we can laugh
at our little ruse.

I want you to be here, because you are part
of me and I am part of you, and the hardest
laugh is to laugh alone at our little ruse,

Being so far apart for so long a time, learning
all we can about the perfect and the imperfect
in the world, where learning to be without is a
greater ruse than any we could play together,
or on each other,

Knowing the ruse of life
and loving the ruse in its face,
the eternal ruse of realities
and the ruse of all the rest.

These Molecular Words

These molecular words come from the sunlight
and the deadly nightshade of God and God,
photosynthesized onto the page, like the fossil imprint
of a leaf from a tree or like a monkey-bone plucked
from the primordial goo.

Inbetween,
as with everything else too numerous to mention,
they live, exist, are, become, do, act, and die,
running like engines, in and of themselves,
fooling us, part of the time, because we think
we see their borders, like a body of work breathes,
throbs, beats, kicks out energy limbs,

And all this because the animal brain gets love.

Upon The Trellis Of A Working Brain

There is a shadow line across the face,
that cuts the eyes like a breeze that feels like a blade point,
a water line across the mask that defines the elements
we chose to live in, some more adeptly, above or below.

The sky swimmer knows both, his flight
fights the weight that pulls him down.

There is an attractive death in letting go
the fierce eyes that describe an Icarus.

There is a faith that keeps him afloat.
This human shape, of faith and will,
cannot be resolved in either.

Between god and beast, we are winged flesh,
swamp angel. The warm mud we plod through
makes the wings heavy, they lose purpose,
until they are tried in the compatible air.

Caked legs kick off the mire, ballast turns
to rudder, and we soar in a completed reality.

The fall from this grace can kill,
when the fond look back at the underworld
spills the flight in backward dreams.

I Am Triumphant

I am triumphant, in my second-hand tennis shoes,
in my jeans with the circle patch on the right knee,
wearing my thrift-shop shirt, my homemade haircut,

I am clean and clear like a glass globe lodged
in the spring soil, the sun has discovered me,
triumphant, the rays love me as I love them.

The gift of love frees the heart to its purpose,
to pump life to the myriad blood fires in the cells,
the body a constellation in a heaven grown larger,
I push back the edge of infinity.

I see her as clearly as if I'd seen no other,
as if a bone dragged out of Adam's chest and
presented to him as the full birth and generation
of a parallel solar system, not shadow planet
or clone amalgam, but twin genesis, done by
the same hand, not déjà vu, like a reworked
screenplay, but the muse's handiwork, sprung
full-blown from both poles of the wide world.

I recognize the originator and the art.

She is no one I have ever known before,
yet I stare, astounded, at the inspired clay,
to make a life so known and unknown,
visible texture, like new eyes on ancient material,
the whole of human history comes down to a common kiss.

Sweet Heart, That Knows It's Instrument

Sweetheart, you'd go nuts
in any other relationship but this one,
like the ink of the soul needs a quill to match
the need and the necessity of the words.

A runaway ball-point pen won't scratch properly.
Computer screens are for other computers to love.

We need our love in our hands, as slow
as our hearts at peace, as quick as the dream
flies ahead of the body blessed to the ground.

We are in love as the mind works,
when free to the colors, intent
on a single petal, hearing the fast
scratch of each new breath.

All The Way

I don't see bits and pieces of those I've known,
familiar hurts and pleasures in her semblance.
I am beyond definition and my poor matching words.
There is no safe language to dress myself in.

I have been here before, but never in love,
my sorted out world, shaken to the absolute absence
of careful clothing, without comfort of role or idea,
the heart a taut membrane, untaught by my experience.

This is the brain, packed with education, unable
to give its learning a hornbook to compare her with.

Here is the soul's breath, around which everything
is born, not known. I have surrendered to the heart,
beyond my memory of any image of it.

My chronicled existence fades to antique paper,
curious, but fragile. I am filled to immortality,
as purely real as God's gift to make us flesh.

154 Sonnet

Put aside the chronicles of wasted
time when you enter this room.

Here is the full crisis of love,

Where a kiss comes down on lips,
like Spring comes up in bloom,

As slow as the rose unfolds,
as full as each week makes a year,

Where a few ingredients make a stew
greater than the table of elements.

Don't bring old eyes and ears
to this occasion of mixture.

What is born alchemic
cannot be melted down
by argument or sorted out
by formulae.

This love require a new name,
and the uses follow.

First Love

Children, linger and savor,
smoke each moment, play
your parts, love is discovery.

Learn each other like you learn yourself,
watch over the curious movement,
a stretch of muscle, a change of shape,
the colors and textures of day to night,
season to season, every small patch
of the other is a garden in cycle,

Be yourself in transition a bursting of life,

Every seed of sensation comes volcanic slow,
so is the earthquake slow, so is the tidal wave,
these forces will overtake you like the dawn,

They will come up with such incredible speed
the mind will lock the body's mystery in
memory like Pompeii, the population
caught forever, as if still alive.

**Only The Mayfly
Has A Shorter Lifespan Than A Couple**

Adam and Eve were monkeys, or apes, if you prefer,
they lived a million years in the Garden of Eden,
they quarreled over the checkbook for a split-second,
until more bananas fell past their satisfaction.

One day, they looked at each other in a wondrous way,
the look echoed in their eyes, like mirror on mirror.

Suddenly, it was time for God and Man to separate,
thought and sin became simultaneous, that fateful day.

Now we are still living in that self-same garden,
and, yes, we have more bananas, and God
must remainder the instructions.

The wondrous never died, but we die,
when we forget the look in the eyes,
that teeters on and defines
our pristine origin.

The Vigil Of The Homeward Bound

To the woman nearby,
to the baker in the back,
to my son, to my daughter,

I want to tell you how grateful I am,
when the poet in me is awakened
by the poem in me,

And I want to cry
for the vigil I keep,
when I am away from this way
all of life makes itself known to me,

And I welcome what
welcomes me most alive,
what only I can do,
what I don't do.

In the doing of it,
I am nothing but what it is,
it is my doing and my undoing.

In my homecoming,
I cry for homelessness,
and I cry for the homeward bound.

No Single Sadness

There is no single sadness,
no everlasting sadness, not
even one to call real.

I wake up in a sadness,
as I would wake up in Italy,
after an overnight train from Spain.
Look, here I am in sadness now.

It's an opportunity to look around a bit,
but in my decision to sightsee, I lose
what it is I'm looking at.

I am Spanish, I am Italian.

Everywhere I go, I am no tourist,
when I realize I have left nothing,
to go nowhere else but here.

Standing Still In India

India becomes such an over-abundance of reality, it becomes an unreality, and then the moment of transparency occurs, or it does not. It does, for me, on the streets of Pune and Lucknow.

Curiosity is the search for transparency.

I stand in the maelstrom of a public marketplace. A hundred yards from me, I see a woman running, lightly, wildly, madly, through the crowded street.

She is a beautiful woman in torn clothing. Her left breast is exposed. No one is paying any attention to her. I am paying attention. I see her, as if the street is vacant but for us.

She runs toward me, then up against me, then away from me, running like water through watercolors, she leaves a streak of blank paper in my mind.

Maybe she runs from abuse, runs for her life, her body beaten, her clothing torn by a husband or angry lover, her cries unwelcome and ignored in a male-dominant society, but to me, she is a goddess, a female bakti, a passionate devotee of the divine, alive in the busy street, in the maelstrom, running to warn, to proclaim, to invite me to my freedom, to my heart, to my love of the divine, to the awareness in the deepest being of my self.

I see a half-naked woman,
running on the street, one day in India.

No one pays any attention.

The wind takes no notice
of the things that blow in the wind.

Love Looking

I am love looking, not for love.
The sun looks not for light.

My eyes look to be eyes.
My eyes have no object
in them to see, they see.

The woman nearby is the ancient virgin
of beginning, again, again, and again.

Love is the unrepeating birth fever
of dying for the sake of us all.

The Way Of Amateur Love

And then a poem appears, and in it, a poet appears,
and in it, the heart appears, and in it, all of life appears,
and in it, I am no one at the center, and what do I care
for any part of it all, when all my cares are met at once?

I find myself and find myself of so little interest, after all,
I begin to notice the absence around the center.

The most forgettable truth is the only one.

All the epiphanies of life are gone
into memory like postcards in a drawer,
are absorbed into the entirety
from which they arise.

I am outside expectation, inside invisibility.
I am apersonal, a visitor in this life, still mine.

A richer simplicity than being true to oneself
is this nobody, that in thought, word and deed,
comes up, before it, too, disappears.

I forget a strong dream, immediately.
Gone, like a shadow passing overhead.

I stubbornly remember what I call this,
the occupation of my heart.

In the Center

The volcano is not volcanic, but the earth is,
the wave is not tidal, but the ocean is,
the poet is not poetic, but is himself a poem.

Do I make nothing of this life, when
I say nothing is its mother, and from
her womb, nothing but beauty is born?

I am the center of this being present,
and everywhere I walk, I see it the same,

Where's my error in forgetting to think
of myself as anything big or small?

In Ruthless Welcome

I open my arms in ruthless welcome.
Mont Blanc stands in ruthless welcome to its majesty.

This heart is not less formidable, not less available,
that its conquest can not be had for the same look and climb.

This heart is not less open
by the bending of its rays in entangled light.

This heart is not less than fire,
wrapped in its own o'er-lapping flame.

Like Penelope Waiting

I ought not sit like Penelope waiting,
or I should, in exact a patience,
be as certain as she, of my own
Odyssean arrival at the door.

No time passes when time has passed away,
when time has been dropped from the equation,
when separation is given no more life than a wink.

How could anyone be gone
from home who is home again,
now here large in the doorway grinning?

Rumors of God

When things blow in the wind,
sway, swing, bow, bend, show
themselves to have unexpected virtues,
rumors of God pass through, yet anyone
can jump in this river, at any time,
from either bank.

A deep absence
opens love in the heart
to love around it occurring.

The mind not looking for love
sees absence nearby and calls it empty.
The mind looking for love beyond itself,
aggresses upon any still or moving object.

Activity around the source can be
enflamed, by its own rumor, to rage.

But nothing of love is true by thought,
it runs from nothing to nothing at all.

This all of nothing begins unknown,
and remains uncontained, again, as always,
unlimited, even by its own arrival and outcome.

She is not she, even when she shows up.
She is she, no matter where she is.

The Moment of Reminding

You touched my arm,
and it was my heart.

There is a tenderness, done by flesh,
unknown by tenderest flesh,
a voluptuousness that poor flesh imitates.

With your hand at my elbow, (or was it my back?)
I am assured of eternity.

In the Near Rain

A bus turns the corner, slips amazingly
between the parked cars and a blue red
yellow and orange garbage truck.

In momentary everything,
there are no contradictions,
In momentary everything,
the essential link is revealed,

In the timeless, nothing is unwelcome,
In stillness, nothing is out of place,
In peace, there is no chaos,

Delight engulfs confusion,
Joy walks among the catastrophe,

Life is a dance of opposites,
in the room of no difference.

This is how a full heart overlaps
and coincides with a heart that is full.

Everyday Life Is Wartime In Slowtime

With this much energy,
its hardest to be still.

Energy screams its way forward.
The mind races for words to match.

The body wants to be drunk in love or death.
Letters home from the front tend to poetry.

This is no time for Time.

I am Being Itself, in a soul,
in a body, in a world, in a dream.

I wake up in full battle gear,
with a naked heart at peace.

A Man Here Once

There was a man here once, who leaped up and down,
puffed like a bellows, in and out, flushed and fainted,
surged, in a kind of glory, collapsed, in victory and
defeat, and rose again, the famous pretender of life.

He has retired from sight and sound,
and everything else remains the same.

This is why it's hard to describe a soul from
anywhere but the inside, and then it barely matters.

As quickly as the sky opens and greatly roars, it sighs,
it smells of hyacinth, small creatures peek out
at the discus sun and its blood-red rays.

All the words we have for everything come later.

When I look to see what is
before the leap into thought,
I see the face of everything.

Little unnamed I opens the door.

The Rain

The rain is said to fall gently, casually,
like hair falls from a clasp, or it pours, or it beats.

When rain falls, I am kind, and when it
beats down in torrents of abuse, I am kind.

I love not my life but my being alive.
It causes me to love my life in mostly so.
Even when I don't, I do, if I'm not swept up
in contradiction, and for a time, believe it.

The eye wanders across the terrain of bodies
and faces, testing, to find the invisible opening
to the white hot core of common substance.

I Know This Sadness

This sadness is the sadness
of the illusion of my separation from her.

She is the woman of my poems, the god of my prayers,
the flesh of my flesh, one breathing life breathing two.

I love her in ways unnamed and named,
in ways said and unsaid. Always.

These poems, prayers, cries, these loves
and lovers have a fathomless source.

This heart is where they're born.

When I speak, it is the way
of their becoming themselves,
from vast nothing to a few words.

When I speak, I speak the breath of life.
When I speak, I forget I'm saying anything.
When I speak, my heart opens to the heart of itself.

This longing in my heart to embrace you
is the embrace in my heart that is you.

Bodies Rub Against Bodies

Bodies rub against bodies,
skin bumps skin, and worlds
begin to sing desire and fear.

One time,
between one man and one woman,
between one and one, in no time at all,
nothing called flesh occurs, and all of
love and sex is invented to explain it.

A road away is made from where distance
has no reality, and separation becomes
the destination of the desire for heaven.

I don't mind this sadness. Some
knowledge tells me it's not my own,
in the way we claim what we hold,
as if owning gives us some power.

This sadness comes in and stays a while,
as it passes from doorway to doorway.

This is how I learn everything,
as everything passes through.

One makes a poem, something is revealed.
The two have nothing to do with each other.

The poem is the clothing of itself undressed.

Namaste the Unknown

A man gets up from his chair,
he politely crosses the busy cafe,
and goes into the backroom.

In solitude,
he namastes the unknown.

His arms rise and spread
like great wings, and the being
that defines an eagle or an angel
emerges from him and engulfs him.

My Body Misses You

I miss you. No such thing.
Missing you is what misses you.
When you are here, you are here
when you're not here.

The pain I think I feel
when I feel your absence
is when I feel your presence
and try to hold.

This pain is trying to hold
the glimpse of heaven
I call you, is me.

Yes, my body misses you.
My body misses everything.

The Invisible Sleeve of God

My love feels small,
when there is any fear in it.
My love feels small, until
I breath it large again.

My love is not mine, except when I try to pinch
between my fingers the invisible sleeve of God.

Love is greater than my narrow hold on
what I hold close, so close it can't be held.

It feels like tearing my heart from my chest,
tearing the flesh from my heart, to toss away
this small thing I hold, in favor of what,
unheld, holds me.

Some Shape of Perfection

The Italians once wrote poems of unrequited love,
tributes to perfect women they would never know,
human deification, an awkward imitation of love
of being itself, discovered in oneself, outside oneself,
by accident, in the house, or on the street.

How else can a human being hope to claim
some shape of perfection, that's come to life
in the simple heart, in the ordinary moment,
between the last breath gone, and the next breath,
not yet breathed?

This Accented Love

The ordinary plan is for all love to fail,
a life to follow of searching, regrets, loss,
and despair, to name a few of the masks
the mind makes of love.

Here's the catch. Love can't fail,
it can only be gone away from.

This accented love is an arrow into the heart.
The arrow always aims in, toward the heart.

Loss lingers at the abandoned bow.

When Light Goes Looking

Whenever I believe I'm being deprived,
it is deprivation asserting its claim.

Deprived is a shadow,
unable to dance in the light.

Everywhere light goes looking,
it cannot find the dark.

The Secret One

I love her because I can smell
that wild sanity burning within her.

It is the secret one who burns to be free
and will be free, because it has already
met with itself in love.

She is the phoenix that rises
from the ashes of the self.

*Let me burn, she says,
until I am fire itself.*

In Memory Like Dreams

Her love has condemned me to this single moment.
All other love affairs are turned to paper houses
in wind, in rain, in fire, in memory like dreams.

I've lost hold of sexual desire, even though
I still imagine it and have fond memories of it.

Even as I kiss her blossomy lips,
even as I caress her silky breasts,
even as I feel the heat of her thighs,
I cannot keep my mind on desire.

In this moment, all the joys of the body
are exquisite and immediate,
what's the sense of desire?

Do I desire to breathe, to exist,
to be in the heart of a sensual heaven?

Yes, and I can't remember when
it was over there somewhere else.

Water Drops

The growing ambition of my stillness
is to disappear into the fabric,
like water drops on cloth,
with you, my other water self,
our love a testament to absence,
as rain drops fall onto the ocean of no name.

This burst of ambition runs through my body,
like a sudden shower rattles the windows
and brings all life to life, followed by sun.

The Emperor's New Clothing

For many years, I teased with love,
like a style of clothing sometimes worn,
and now I am stripped naked to love
without a moment's ceasing.

It took so long to admit this love.
I discovered it did wonders for my mind.

In this love, my mind goes out of itself.
I turn my invisible socks inside out.

The emperor has no clothes,
and his invisible socks
are especially beautiful.

The Only Definition of Love

It takes only
a little fear
to stay away
from this love.

I am fearless,
I surrender.

This is the only
definition of love
that doesn't lie,
just a little.

The Ceremony

When I rose
to receive my Award,
she was in the front row.

As I began my thank-yous,
she spoke, so only I could hear.

Hey, Lover, kiss this,
she said, and raised
the skirt of her heart.

All the cameras
were on my silence
and the dumbfounded
joy it contained.

The Echo of Joy

I don't know how to make love.
I can't find where it begins
and where it ends.

It begins everywhere,
and its end cannot be found.

I can't long for my absent lover,
my sadness cries out
for the wrong return.

Who would come home to misery
but misery in another form?

Is despair the echo of joy?

I sing in, to the heart of the heart,
where even grief awakens in the angels
the unseparate song of love itself.

The Beast In The Limbs

With a knot in the muscle of my left shoulder blade,
I ask Carol about it, the softly buxom, peasant-faced
Queen of England reading Franz Fanon.

This is a circumstance familiar to me,
that ought to lead to a poem, expository,
exploratory, an awe in search of the awesome,
I go out to come home.

I look outside, for what has no outside,
I look for outside to come in,
I look for my own lack of separation
to come back to me, with gentlest passion,
to close the gap I've never seen opened.

I don't write the poem, the poem writes itself,
the poem writes me, I am the poem written
not by me, I am the poem not written.

I ask myself what creative work
knots me in post-Gordian knotlessness.
I am not this knot, and yet it's lodged itself
by the blade in my back.

This stabbing is behind me,
where only the dead live to tell.

Who has stabbed me? Who has pointed me this way?
With whom am I stuck? Has no one stuck me?
Am I relieved? Am I not in pain?

Whoever inhabits me inhibits my
turning back to see who it is I am.

Is it she to whom my sadness clings,
or is it just a clump of stubborn meat,
a knot of thought, not what's real?

It's a dream in the body I enter to rewrite its ending.

I find a woman in a ball entwined.
She broke my heart and left her torn off
piece of it nearby, a gristle of the past,
a fist held tight within.

Between the blades of thought
is awesome indifference to pain,
but, in them, is awe of some pain
I discover I am holding.

It lurks nearby, within, up behind my creativity,
like a beast in a tree, on a limb, stalking.

The deepest freedom of my heart
depends on nothing for it to leap free.
I am confined in my nearness to freedom.

There is a beast in my limbs
whose only pain is in my not leaping.
I owe this shouldering a gratitude.

You Put Your Hands Together

You put your hands together,
in a crowded room, as if thinking,
as if musing, as if in prayer, and a little
of each is present, but what thrills you
is the kiss, in a public place, the perfect
embrace, the warm meeting, the touch,
the dance of stillness, of your own two hands,
naked against each other, from head to toe.

Your ceremony opens the door,
once more, each time, out in the world,
to the heart, in ways others might not guess,
a common thrill, like a meeting with a god,
unwitnessed, like the kiss in Keats' heart,
just before he paints its promise
on a Grecian urn.

The Love of Women

Love of woman has been the language
of your heart, your tongue, your divine
perplexity, and you are nearly wordless.

You don't see ahead of you any fire
for the engine that got you to this moment.

The seeker has found the sought, and now what?

You look at charts, maps and globes, and there is
no more need to put your feet on another shore.

Now, whose boat do you board, whose journey
beckons, whose version of destiny is the same?

You never wrote a love poem
knowing what it was going to be.

Now, your not knowing has no desire
and no having been there before to feed on.

Maybe you go alone to this ecstasy.

In This Sequential Life

For the first time in this sequential life, you feel what it feels like to be alone and about to die.

There's no more faith, in you, that this is not true, even though you are far from being alone, and perhaps, far from being about to die, but it's like walking into an unopened room and standing in the middle of it.

So this is the room of being alone.
This is the room of being about to die.
This is another room you've come into,
and now you are here, in this room.

There is nothing to being alone,
and there is nothing to dying,
but now you are in their house,
and now it is your house, and now
there is nothing beside who you are
to hold on to.

All things of love and desire
are on the outside looking in.

You have died,
and you have been perfectly alone.

You know that death is another other,
that death, too, will die.

You've walked past death's house many times,
with a fondness to know it, as you've always

known it, from having been born here.
What you find is what you've always known.

It isn't that one turns on the light
to dispel the darkness, but that the light
comes on by itself to reveal that nothing
has ever been concealed.

You think of courting death,
not with bold gestures or demands,
but with a sly, come-hither glance,
just to see what face will be revealed,

But the face of death is the same face
as every other face you've ever faced.

The Shaken and Settled Self

This container overflows
from all that's been put into it,
and no one notices, until it exceeds
the container, and then everyone
can see who you are.

You've wondered if there was an end
to the filling up of the container of the self.

You've been larger than your life,
and you've compacted yourself,
you've shaken and settled yourself.

You've poured into yourself all that is good,
after pouring into yourself everything else.

You have been filled to overflowing,
and it is more clear than ever,
that there is no container
and never has been.

That Urge Toward More Life (Galway Kinnell)

This is the trick,
that art become more of life
and not merely an encouragement
to contain the urge.

What is life but the presence
of the moment of being itself?

What is the failure of art but the commentary,
beautiful or true, that enshrines it or postpones it.

What is the moment of art that is
the moment of life?

No one knows,
in any way that can be said.

The Lover You Seek

The lover you seek is someone who,
among the thousand eruptions of recognition,
touches that part of your heart called stillness.

You start to make a list and you discard it.
You name your desires and discard desire.

Only stillness invents love in your heart.
You look in others for what's true in you.

You look for stillness in whoever she is,
the way you look for it in yourself.

You look by not looking,
with both eyes wide open.

The absence of love
is the room for its discovery.
You truly love by living in love's absence.

Open in your emptiness, you live constantly
in love's presence, not in the desire for it.

Desire goes out from the center.
In fear of the empty heart, desire runs
away from love by running toward its
flickering light on the distant trees.

Fall completely into the empty heart, let go
of the beauty in your dreams, see what comes
pouring out of everything that's been lost.

On Milk Island

I accept my surrender to flesh, my fall
to gracelessness, my hopeless adoration
of softest skin, my worship of my least self,
the headlong degradation of my divinity.

I give myself to the begging bowl of transient,
feral sustenance, I throw away all thought
of self and selflessness, I let the frightened
heart of death stay a while at the border,
where love is the only land it can never enter.

This is like eating chocolate,
after years on Milk Island,
or the reverse.

The Woman In Red

Between physiology and psychology,
I lean toward the sun.

Years ago, at Carol Ann's, everyone ran
onto the roof to see the moon's eclipse.
"You're a poet," someone said,
"Aren't you interested in this?"

"I'm a sun poet," I said, surprising myself
from deep within my burried psyche.

I long for a fortuitous meeting
with the woman in red, let's be honest.
But why?

Do I want a name
for the god who gives me this grace?
I don't need to know her name
to know she is none other than who I am.

I am drawn to the sun, until,
consumed by its identity,
I name the world by its light.

I begin to burn up the kindling ground
I call the moon, I call She.

She has a magical face, it's disturbing
to look at something so beautiful.
When I look at her, it's difficult to think.
Only her beauty thinks in my eyes.

I search her face for the name of her beauty,
but her perfection can't satisfy my naming.

I want to take her into me,
until I am taken into her.

This is my greatest fear and desire,
that I will be lost in undefinable beauty,
I will be swallowed up in my own surrender,
I will be washed into nothing by the waves
of my own outpouring heart.

Truth And Beauty

A poem, when none is in sight?
Uninvented language naturally born?

What is the name of the unforeseen,
unforetold, unexpected, open-centered self?

What are the words for the unworded,
wordless, wordfree, wordforsaken present?

What explorer calls out from the unknown,
that none of his kind, nor he, has ever entered?

What can I sing in a silent throat?
Who do I say is standing in this empty clearing?

The poet begins where he is, stops time,
looks around, tells what he sees.

The prophet begins where he ends, timeless,
and speaks of nothing to no one, so that it is,
once more, impressed upon the heart.

Truth and beauty speak to each other
in a tongue neither understands.

Truth shows itself beauty,
and beauty speaks truth, and all
the words and images phosphoresce.

To The Poor In Spirit

I want to be weak in love,
I want to be a man who is weak,
weak in surrender, unafraid
to think less of myself
by being more of myself
than thinking is able to be.

I look at her beauty, and I see
the beauty of the heart under my shirt.

I sit sun-bathing in grace,
in the absence of reassurance,
not comforted by the familiar,
and the door opens in me everywhere.

This is what kills human beings; the lovemaking
in the hopeless moment, the being drunk in sobriety,
the disorientation of perfect balance, the confusion
of clarity that never falls to routine, the awake
that never becomes a dream of awakening.

It is the place I enter as through a door.
I am standing in the doorway, neither
in this room, nor am I not in this room.

In the presence of foreboding, I undercut
my complacency, I put myself at risk,
I unsettle myself, I leap into the unknown
without knowing, I leap in trust without anything
to trust, I leap in love without anyone to love,
I leap in life without any name for this life.

I jump from this cliff with wings
useless and transparent, unknowing
what will appear beneath my feet, or when.

I watch her pass, and I put my tongue in my heart.
The song raises the singer. The air invents the wings.

Love and delight are the familiars with
whom I am now their secret self laid bare.

To desire to love and be loved
is to blanket the snow with white.

To desire to love and be loved
is to call a halt to love and beg for more.

What About Sex?

Will I ever have sex again? Let light
make love to light. Where's the problem?

The most beautiful woman in the city is washing dishes.
Men bring her their poems, they write her notes, and they
court her with friendly words, as they pass the stations
of her dance.

I dance with the woman with soapy hands.
I dance with the dancer in the heart.