

The Ocean in a Bottle

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The Ocean in a Bottle

I don't see through you like I said I did,
my obsession is not insight.

I am a body turned to gas under its own pressure.

Sometimes I am lost outside my bones, and I look
so hard for them I think I see other people's bones
under their flesh.

When I feel their bones and their flesh,
temporarily I quit looking for my own.

I thought I found my bones under your flesh.

When I told you I was embarrassed to know you so well
as to become you, I was confessing a terrible emptiness.

When I look down and see my cloudy transparency,
I become afraid.

My ambition to be full doesn't diminish you
but makes you unbearably desirable.

I cannot become you, I cannot fill myself with you.

If I alone ghost the space between us
I will succeed only in vacating myself.

In a Motel with Priorities

It's 12:30 AM in Elko, Nevada.

I switch on the brand new cable Hitachi TV,
Jack is putting his paper barnyard together.

Water dripping in the slow draining sink,
dead bugs in the translucent light fixtures,
a small circle smashed into the wall by the doorknob,
the chair doesn't fit under the desk, the heater has
no manual valve, patches of unmatched rug cover
worn spots on the carpet, no hangers in the closet,
plastic cups are wrapped in sanitary plastic wrap.

I am lying on a pink chenille bedspread, over an army
blanket and starched white sheets, the bed has a metal
frame painted to look like high gloss mahogany.

Jack almost has the whole thing assembled already.

When we pulled into the Western Corral Motel
at midnight, I demanded to pay under ten bucks,
my limit, the man said, "\$8.50," he was ready for bed.

A half-hour later, after touring the town looking for better,
I rang the bell on his pre-fab motel office, waking him up,
short fellow, he knew I wouldn't find any better, \$8.50,
and he gave me silver, 50c and a silver dollar.

I brought Julie's banana bread in with us, didn't eat any,
drank two glasses of wine, still warm from a full day of sun.

I know the car won't start in the morning.

I drove for three hours, knowing that if I stopped
and somehow shut off the engine, I'd never get
going again, something wrong with it.

I had visions of telling Jack how to pop the clutch
on a long grade in the middle of Nevada in the dark,
then watching as he drove off in the night.

Alternating between despair and complacency.

"This is God's country, we are safe here." and "This is the
forbidding surface of a cold, cruel and uncompromising planet."

I finally eat some banana nut bread and drink
a third glass of wine, or is it a third plastic of wine?

Jack finishes the barnyard and shows me a picture
of Bugs Bunny sneaking off with the carrots
right under Elmer Fudd's nose.

Earlier today, I was overcharged for a Polish strudel
with gravy, and \$8.50 is an exorbitant price to pay
to keep this anachronistic floating America alive.

At Home in Moline

As Don Juan would do to his front porch,
I wander around in my parents' house
looking for the magic spot
from which to experience everything.

Jack and Rachel get out baby toys and play with them,
I read with fascination my college yearbook.

I put on my brother's shoes, 6'2", and he wears higher heels
than I do, thin in the leather and tight like Jose Greco's.

There's my ex-wife's former boyfriend in a leather jacket
holding a rifle, there's Vince Anku from Ghana standing naked
in a bath towel holding a sign that reads, **Bombs Away**.

There I am holding a plastic water faucet
up to my left temple with just a trace of concern
on my face as to what's going to come pouring out.

Smoking cigarettes, drinking Cutty Sark, sitting in my father's
Naugahyde lounge chair with the stick-shift position adjuster.

I say to the kids, "Here's a picture of your mother;
can you tell which one she is? Yeah, that's right.
Here's your mom singing with Sam Schuman,
and here's me, dancing." "Is that my mom?"
"No, that's Betsy, a girl I used to know."

Betsy says to me, "How does Julie feel about you going out with me?"

"Betsy, how do you feel, married to an ex-Cuban, two kids later, are you wandering your kitchen coop reading tarot cards, talking to ghosts like I am?"

I went to the Quad-City Open today and saw Slammin' Sammy Snead sink an eight-foot putt to tie for the lead on the third day, 95 degrees, drinking Hamm's beer, talking to my brother, telling him, "Mark, you are the only person I know who gives me an indiscriminate running commentary on his every inconsequential prejudice."

"Women," he says, "if you look at them, are disgusted, they think every man is a lecher."

There's Wayne Gano in his underwear and there's Jack Chapman looking like an ingénue, a man I loved, I thought he jilted me.

Jack says, in the dark, sleeping in Cantwell's room, a year after graduation, "You know, there's something I've wanted to say..."

"What?" I say, "You can say it ... you missed me."

“Uh, yeah,” he says, and a slab of recognition falls on me, he wasn’t going to say that at all.

“I like pizza,” or “President Johnson is no good,” or “College was a bore,” but not, “I love you.”

I call up Paul tonight in California to hear what it sounds like to be a voice, and who answers the phone, but my old friend Chuck.

“Chuck, you asshole, I hope to God you’re sleeping in my bed.” “Yeah, I sort of am,” he says.

I walk by my father, and I touch him, I caress him.

Jack cries, “Rachel gets everything.”

Not tonight, my son,
tonight, I love you best.

There Was a Goddess of Poetry

There was a goddess of poetry
living on our block for a week.

Tonight, I went up to Paul and said,
“You know, it’s a shame we don’t go see her
while she’s here, and he said, “No, man, she’s gone.”

I saw a face in a window, I thought it was her,
clouded by curtains and cigarette smoke,
but Paul says she’s gone anyway.

I could see her clearly, refrigerator and overhead light
on the second floor, Paul suggested I read a book.

I called a mortal woman on the phone and left
my number to be called, later on, if she wanted.

No Eurydice she, I’ll have to survive on my own.

After all, the goddess is gone, no use exaggerating
what I’m left with.

The Cow Pond

My heart is beating faster,
I'm at a loss to remember it all,
I remember the house almost exploding,
running under the house to shut off the gas,
no curtain for the toilet.

The road winding beside a creek up to the house,
the undergrowth thick and green beside the road,
insects, noises at night, shutting the door against
the dogs and pups, shutting the gate after going
through in cars or on horseback, listening to the
breathing as we slept, not touching, in one room.

All of us forming a caravan from Alan's house,
over the hill, to the cow pond, and swimming naked,
two miles from the ocean, Nancy's small breasts exposed,
Patricia's hidden, Katie, I can't remember, was she naked?
My erection growing and calmed.

Walking the horse back and forth down the steep slope,
slipping in my leather-soled shoes, did the police come,
or the owner, or only a fisherman?

The children drowning each other.

Lying on the cracked, caked mud bank, under the rickety tower,
was it a pumping station or a dock when the water was higher?

The cows came but moved off when Alan yelled,
what did he yell? And he was naked, 40 years old,
a school teacher asking questions, at home, alone,
on the weekend, suddenly with visitors.

Katie in love with Tom, I didn't know it at the time,
naked, I rolled over on my belly, let my erection subside,
the children finding sand easier to play in, the water cold.

Tom and I stood on the platform a long time before diving in,
coming up shouting, I was the first naked, eager for it, leaving
my clothes and running to touch the water for an excuse.

Nancy quiet, the least apparent, was the only woman
naked after a while, was Katie naked? I don't think so,
I was overweight, Alan trim, Tom the one loved.

Tom climbed the wooden tower, I looked out across the pond,
up at Tom, back for a moment at the others circling a spot,
finding a smooth place for the sacks of food and clothing.

The children, what were the children doing? I went around
the pond, my boy followed, his sister too small, still with
her mother, was she ever naked or did she just seem so?

I wanted to be naked, at a distance from the women
and the men, come walking back at them, worried about
the sharp gravel underfoot, looking down, seeing my genitals.

I looked up, they were looking in the sacks
for sandwiches, still too early to begin eating.

Nancy's large ass, Patricia with stretch marks, covered up,
never uncovered, sullen, she was Alan's closest friend,
a dancer and Tom's wife, Katie my wife.

Terrible things happening, children drowning,
getting lost, being hunted after, out by the horses,
looking for poison oak, pointing out the poison oak
to the children, the fog coming in and burning off,
the long view of the artichoke fields and seeing
what adults would do, what were we doing?

So, reflecting now, from the distance, Nancy seems attractive,
Alan the sad one. No, I am the sad one, naïve, some sympathy
for the cows, their pond, running when Alan yelled, he the expert,
knowing what to yell, seeing a bull, the stray bull, missing from
someone's farm, Alan the neighbor, hunting for the stray,
warning us off.

I a swimmer, Tom a swimmer, the water only a pond, cold,
swimming incidental, we talked, some naked, Patricia not,
what did we talk about? Katie, my wife, in love with Tom,
I did not know it, at the time, she not noticing that I loved her
perspiration in the sun, touching a fly off her shoulder, she was
naked, her stretch marks not showing, or I don't remember.

Yes, I remember her ass, larger than she wished, everyone's about as bumpy and wrinkled, her awkward run to the water, she self-conscious of Tom, I thought she was afraid to be naked, she was embarrassed naked in the sauna with Kevin and Lisa.

I naked, probably the first, an erection coming quickly, sending exhilaration through me, subsiding, I can be naked, the first to it, still afraid of horses, children, men, women, ignored, Katie in love with Tom, Patricia, his wife, covered with ... her awareness?

Patricia and Tom now divorced, Katie and me now divorced, Nancy divorced before, Alan single, Even Kevin and Lisa divorced.

Not so foolish as to blame the water or the sun or nakedness or the children or animals, we paired every way we could think of.

Nancy seems more beautiful, in memory now, the rest, now that I know the story not so interesting.

Tom and I driving by the artichokes, stacked in crates, trying to buy some from the pickers, "no English", leaving the pond because someone came up in a truck, I think, with fishing gear.

I Direct the Phone Book in a Symphony

I direct the phone book in a symphony
with a short piece of fallen cornice.

The table lamp presides
like a bundle of flaming sticks.

San Francisco tonight is cool
like the outreaches of a campfire.

I am sitting in my kitchen
like a man with connections.

It matters not whether you carefully choose
the rampaging automobiles you step in front of,
the pain is the same.

When your truck bursts into flames, and you enlist
a farmer to toss dirt on the miserable event, when you
tell the story with no love in it, of course the Indians
of your true desires will get in.

My father tells me he wanted his sons to lay
a thousand bucks a month on him in his old age.

He's going into his old age like I go into the phone book,
blind hope and blind love anticipate our blind date with the future.

Two Letters at Once

My brother writes to me from Illinois, where he is living in our parents' house, "Are you going to send me my pants," he says, and then he describes the pants, "The blue corduroy pants with the flap on the back pocket."

Then he says he needs them, then he tells me he ran into my all-time favorite girlfriend at the country club in East Moline where he is a bartender, and he mentions he met another girl who said I once told her she reminded me of an Easter egg, he says he forgets her name, he says my favorite girlfriend has two kids and a bald husband.

Then he says Dad and Mother have gone to Mexico, then he says he and his girlfriend are going to Jamaica Jan 8, then he says, "Send me my pants," then he asks me to help get him back in school out here, then he says he'll be out here in February, he finishes by saying, "The snow is two feet deep but today is beginning to melt."

Then I open the letter from Chuck who is living back in New York with his parents, his letter comes to me on a Macy's bag, he jokes about working at such a humiliating job as clerk at Macy's.

Then he talks about our friend Paul who is in the Yucatan and how terrific that is, I mean whoever actually goes where they say they want to go, then he says he's saved up 350 bucks and is about to move into the city, he says he's expecting a job at one of the 75 private schools he's applied to.

Then he asks me to send him a copy of the play we wrote together, he says he's included a dollar bill to pay for the copying, but I look and there is no dollar bill, I look on the floor to see if I dropped it, I look in the bag to see if he's being cute about it, but there is no dollar bill.

So I reply, "Cheapskate, I'm not going to send you another goddamn play, there's no dollar bill anywhere."

And, "Fuck you, bastard, I'm not going to send you your goddamn blue pants, I didn't ask you to leave them here."

And then I zerox the pants and I send a copy of them to Paul, in the Yucatan, who never writes me any letters.

Dear Paul, I Have Got Drunk in Your Honor

Dear Paul, I have got drunk in your honor,
reeling around the passageway, stumbling
between the faucet and the pouring rain,
inhabiting the house with my hands.

I called everyone I know tonight, except you,
because the Yucatan is unlisted, on TV, a man
convicted of a crime of passion, reneges before
the climax, I aimlessly piss my lurching desire
into the River of the Porcelain Banks.

Please forgive me if my note is brief,
I am in the city, and here we are discreet.

There's danger in the city, it's harder and harder to get
drunk, I hear Tequila's fifty cents a quart in Guatemala.

The woman I wrote you about eats and drinks alongside me,
the town is a desperate place, I hear Mexico's hot and humid,
and drinking is an acceptable escape from difficulties.

There's a beautiful episode of drinking on TV, a man rides
a horse down a road and there's water flowing in a stream
like booze, Mexico must hold such wonders.

Ah, The City Smells Like a Forest Fire

Ah, the city smells like a forest fire.

Jim brings Bambi to my side to calm me
and a charred squirrel to sharpen my fear.

What exactly is an emergency medical poet? Why
is he carrying bandages AND a blunt instrument?

Ah, the city smells like fish and chips,
dumped on its victims like a pile of leaves.

A poet is often the only care available
when the accident occurs, and he's just
as likely to kick the victim as kiss him.

My Friend Flew in from Denver

My friend flew in from Denver, I hadn't seen him
in eleven years, and boom, on the second day
of his stay he lay on the couch in an insulin seizure,
his body in convulsion, his eyes bulging demonically.

I sent the kids to wake him up, to go out to dinner,
Jack ran back to my room, "He scares me," Jack said.

He and I went to college together, now I held him,
bending his rigid body against itself at the waist,
my hand at the nape of his perspiring neck, pouring
orange-pineapple juice and sugar water between his
cigarette-stained teeth, over his swollen tongue.

"C'mon, man, drink it, swallow, swallow, that's it, good, man,
beautiful," he gulped and swallowed an infant's amount of juice.

Bob was easy-going and droopy-eyed in college,
a year later, he discovered he was diabetic.

"Rachel, get me a towel," five years old,
and as soon as I said it, she handed it to me.

Before he went into shock, before he went to sleep,
he told me he was a diabetic, I got a card out of his wallet,
it said, "I am a diabetic, if I do not respond, if I act strange,
it's because of my condition."

“C’mon,” he said, without consonants, bug-eyed, gurgling in his throat, “c’mon,” he said, and I was embarrassed, I thought, “He wants me to hold him, to comfort him,” I had the body of a full-grown man in my arms, and he wanted me to cradle him, to nurture and care for him.

He flew out here for a job interview, they gave him 30 minutes, and they ignored him, like an over-eager suitor, I asked him, “What do you want, do you want more honey, do you want to rest, do you want more juice, do you want to sit up?”

“C’mon,” he said, in a demanding, desperate groan, the city ambulance drivers stood around like helpless passersby, masking their helplessness with first aid information they recited uneasily, as I held my friend.

In Denver, 10 years ago, he took my brother and me to the dog races, and to impress another friend, he introduced us to Denver traffic with reckless finesse and called it “a traffic move”.

In college, he missed an afternoon class for several weeks, and it became a recurring dream of mine, to have missed something for months, without excuse, with terrible fear.

He spit mucus and honey, from aspirating the fluids, onto the towel, I wiped his cheeks and lips, “Good, man, good.”

He coughed and groaned, almost a wail, he dragged his arms in the air above his head, knuckled his eyes and spit like a comic infant onto my sleeves, "Thanks a lot, pal," I said, pretending relief.

After seeing an old friend, with an embrace of recognition, knowing there was so much good talk ahead of us, when a better ambulance came, they strapped him in and carried him down the steep stairs like a man down a mountain.

The driver asked me for his details, 33 years old, college teacher, divorced, alone, diabetic, tired, under emotional stress, away from home, possible shock.

We had spent the night laughing and telling stories, full of ourselves, from one bar to another with Carol Ann, who said, "I'm learning so much about you, because of Bob."

He lay in Room 5, ministered to by a tall nurse, he looked at me, "Jesus, man," he said and glanced at the ceiling, "I've done this before, and every time I come out of this, someone says, 'That's amazing,'" they gave him his insulin, and his recovery was so dramatic, so immediate, someone always had to see it was amazing.

We took a cab home and got a pizza, and I told him how to eat his pizza, he told me his seizure was a manipulation, and that I was the one manipulated, "And now I'm telling you how to eat your pizza," I said, and he nodded.

“You know,” I said, “you’re the first person to tell me they’ve been manipulating me before I resented it.”

We talked about living analytical and manipulative lives, “It’s layer upon layer,” he said.

At breakfast, he said, “You are a performer, do you think you are unique in it, or do you think other people do it, too?” I said I thought I was unique, but I thought everyone else did it, too.

On a picnic today, he acted out a two-panel cartoon from the New Yorker, a cave man holds meat over a fire, while his woman and kids cower in the background, and in the second panel, a suburbanite holds meat over a barbecue pit, while his wife and kids recoil in the background, he enacted the scene with energy and made the ground beside the table a theatre.

He thanked me, before he flew home, and we both knew he’d made something happen to thank me for, but it didn’t matter.

Jack wore his Cub Scout uniform all weekend, even though the troop had disbanded, the den mother had resigned.

Someone at the picnic called the Boy Scouts a fascist organization, but I said, “No, it’s ritual, it’s happy ritual.

Filling Out the Tight Pockets of the Spirit

Filling out the tight pockets of the spirit, country music at dawn
to pump the blood alive, thinking about my old bed of soft nails.

TV is no cave entrance, its flashing horizon is no place to go,
dear God, who has no face, no name, no language, I want to
take it like an animal, not like a man, I can hear my heart
beating in my ribs, like a gorilla with gumption.

There are two ways to smoke a cigarette, a head in the oven,
or a tongue in the campfire, these teeth used to chew raw meat.

There's a conga drum in the kitchen mocking the telephone that
sits like a plastic lizard on the shelf, the damn red thing couldn't
bite a bison on the butt if it had a map and an army to back it up.

Swift was right when he dreamed the pitted moonscape of the human
face, wrong when he despised it, no civilized formica, we are quarries,
swamps, we are caribou, infested with worms, we are sharks, not
submarines, dolphins not bathyspheres, move over, monkeys,
I'm hot for your jungle.

They're playing music as loud as they can at 2AM in the Stadium
Garage, and the cars therein move not a muscle, neither do they
dance, but the music continues into the night.

Don't Cut Your Hair in Your Ex-Wife's House

The stranger says, "One thing for sure, when it's crummy down here, you know it's not any better in the city," she was sitting neck-deep on the first shelf of the Jacuzzi, her body a distorted dwarf in the water.

"Do you drink beer?" she says, "I'm working as a waitress to get money to be a chiropractor," she was a farm girl, twenty miles from my ex-wife's hometown in Iowa, I tell her I'm a poet, "Sound's exciting," she says, and I drop the subject, "I'm in 210," she says, "drop in for a beer, will you be here, tomorrow?" she says, indicating the pool.

It's a great place to be a kid, no hassle, lots of room, you can leave the front door open, there are other kids, rules that nobody cares about, schools that don't matter, walls marbled by hand prints.

On TV, there's Rudolf Nureyev, telling Morley Safer why he won't have kids, it would drive the little imbeciles crazy, my ex-wife explains in a diary I find that I seemed at times, during our "unhappy" marriage, a mundane and adolescent person, and so I am.

And here is Meadow Oaks, and Mountain View, and "I'll take two years at Foothill College," the future chiropractor says, "it can't do me any harm," but it is passion I seek, beyond the comfort.

I fix dinner, I fix a flat tire, I fix the adjustment on the TV, but I can't get a fix on passion, they're bringing gambling to Atlantic City to bring the bored walkers alive.

I will strut my vanity on a stage, I will put my self
inside a self larger than myself and watch it fit.

I like being a poet, I like my work.

This may be real life down here, but it's lousy theatre,
it may be conversation, but the conversation is over.

In the Lovely half-Light of Late '75

In the lovely half-light of late '75, the air is a splendid red-gray from the Best Foods Mayonnaise factory.

The forest of toppling buildings I prepare to enter is fronted by fire engines, careening into crowds.

I've been waiting for you to take this walk with me, if a person can be called important for love.

The blue sky is diffused with bricks and the woodland paths are scattered with unbroken cemented hearts.

All my illusions are being replaced because of you, my children are bringing me cotton gifts.

The Syrup on the Balcony

It is juvenile to wrap yourself in waxed paper, easing the vision between the plastic case of the newspaper and the unprinted, "I care, I care," Susie is my cousin, she's a soulful limper sister, she's all roses and toeses and fleecing the lamb again.

Nobody questions the questioner, nobody makes a piazza of the most appropriate noses that demand it by their availability to the sinus desire that drips like a questionnaire onto the sidewalk in front of the innocent who most need to ask the question, and yet they are the very ones being queried, nevermind for answers.

The syrup on the balcony makes watching the parade a slippery affair, I know better, I saw a longhorn in the stairwell, looking for a hotel room full of merchandise, sitting in the cafeteria downstairs, relocating detonator caps from his brain to his fingertips, and yet I feel giddy, like a kid at the rippley end of a long swing arc.

I don't feel rigid or geometric, I feel like running down the corridors of my vesicles like a flesh and blood, fleshy, bloody, fleshed and blazing, flushed and brazen, flambuoyant, brooding, breeding, flicker on the water, tongue on the lips, egg comes out of the shell, like a hope, like a drambuie of the tasted dream bowie knife.

A little doggie goes down on the cement like the noise of a shadow, like a sight you see when the sound your hear appears in the great big cavern of your eardrums, and you get all wet in the warm rain that comes down in the blazing sun.

Mama, I answer with a clean plate, Mama, I loved your fried lies,
Mama, ask me a heavy question about water, today I have gotten
wonderfully wet, Mama, I think there's a swimming pool in North
Beach that I can live in like an almond in a roca, like a pinball
player in a pinchback suit, it's true, Mama, goodnight, Mama,
goodbye Mama, hellow, mi Corazon.

Hello, my most baby, my unbaby,
my every wonder, my end of it all.

I have finally come clean like a crawdad gone thoughtful on
the water close end of the lakeside sand, like an armful of
arms that wail in my arms, like I love you, like I love you all,
like I love you all you are.

Goodnight Kate, Goodnight Irene, when the moon
comes over the mountain, I'll see you in my dreams.