

I Write Poetry, He Said

When I think of how New Yorky this part of town is,
it reminds me how New Yorky New York City is.

Old lovers appear in my dreams as someone new. I once
thought everyone I met was someone I'd known before.

A swath of green satin crosses the street, on the body
of a stranger I'll never see again. Almost no one imagines
their body alive with the electric energy of wonder.

W.S. Merwin read, on a stormy night on Oahu
many years ago, and afterwards, an old man, who said
he was a farmer, asked the famous poet what he did.

I write poetry, Merwin said. *No*, the man said, *I mean what
do you do? I write poetry*, Merwin said, as a matter of fact.

I didn't wonder if he came from money, or married well, or was
lying through his teeth. *I write poetry*, he said, and I was in awe.

The Black Sheen

I say I am a poet, and all distinction falls away. I smell deeply scented wood. I see a white sweater, platinum hair pulled tight, a boxed wall-hanging hung slightly askew, three people wearing glasses and playing cards.

I felt lightheaded, describing the passion of my life. My daughter said she thought I called her. She was afraid I'd had another heart attack. We are the most durable of beings, the most fragile of beings.

The black sheen of empty chairs, nearby, is a sign of my continuity in this life, but neither black chairs nor the air around them accounts for this being here. I speak myself back to the black sheen of being.

I thought I might have misled myself, in the faith of my aloneness, when a woman held me. My certainty was exposed, as if the sun was crossed by a cloud. In my certain self, there's no other to be missed, but in this transient life, uncertainty is my legacy.

A woman embraced me, and I began to miss what had seemed only absent before. I've been brokenhearted in love but now I feel the pain in my broken body, in the momentary touch of another. This missing thing declares itself in my body, not in my passionate being.

The Essential Occupation

One day, I woke with the clear and unbroken vista of being alive.
This is the fullness of a heart open to the advantage of itself.

Arthur Miller imagined his life a plateau where others' judgment
would honor his awareness. It seems ripe and wise to speak from
this place, where when I reach the moment I arrive to witness.

The man who wails in prison brings down its walls upon himself.
The man who prays for release becomes a prisoner of his prayers.

Conrad Aiken applied for conscientious objector on the grounds
he was engaged in the essential occupation of writing poetry.

Adonais in the Blizzard

Among those I know and don't know, I see bone loneliness and dull fear, where in magical thinking, all my contraries were solved, by an intoxication of one sort or another. The remaining poison in my brain is the residue of rejection, learned at the knee of my ancestors and carried forward to perfection.

I am a crippled man who learned to run with the pack, certain I'd be left for carrion, but despite this dark cause, from which to extrapolate a life, the spirit of poetry remains, and nothing corrupts the gift that survives the wounding and the scaring. I speak of the recognition of love, in the disappearance of the self, and little of my broken life.

Adonais in the blizzard, is it all of us who ignore the thorn for eternity's grace, or is it all of us who go to war on scant evidence? Knowledge shadows innocence, but innocence cares nothing of the darkness.

Beyond the Beat

Many times I have proposed a lover to emblemize my heart, when in the truth of the heart, beyond its beat, there is no other. I'm more alone than alone. There's no swimmer in the ocean, no shore to swim to, no fish that slips its skin to become another lover to love.

The more alone I become, the deeper my world widens. I'm as alone as the sea, as alone as the sky, and when I put my feet on the ground, I don't stand alone. My companionship is unending in every step I take.

When I sit back and luxuriate in aloneness, I'm not alone, and then I'm less alone when I walk in the world. Walt Whitman knew it. Emily Dickinson knew it. This aloneness is the raw meat of the poets and the oracle's cave of the soul.

What if one accepts the loss of every beautiful icon in one's life? Can a Christian love God without Jesus? Can a Buddhist love Being without Buddha? Can a painter love beauty without a model?

Can a romantic fall in love without lust or desire? Can anyone love without the ruse of love? Can I stay in love when love is inseparable from emptiness? Can I keep love's wonders, knowing that love and wonder are done in their undoing? Can I live in my undoing?

Searching for Solace

My mother kept repeating, toward the end of her life
that we were a happy family, that each of us was happy.
We were happy, weren't we? she said, searching for solace.

The happiness she meant to cauterize, to a permanent
smile, was close enough to the truth, that it took me a
lifetime to sort out the real from the show of reality.

Beneath the facade of happiness was the simple salt of purest
Being, and in my search for happiness, I stripped away everything
not true, and I found myself with nothing to wear. and no one to
wear it, naked in the heart of happiness, without a name for it

There's a moment of vulnerability with another, in art or in being itself,
that is the loss of control amid the controllable and the uncontrollable.
My quest is surrender so close I mistake its reality for the desire for it.

I hold myself at the brink where surrender needs the wisdom of its origin,
more than it needs the charm of my desires. I walk the brink until, naked
and fearless, I look into the heart of surrender, not its entrancing face,
and this language seems coincidental.

A Rich Man's House

There's an open doorway, a light breeze with shadows in the glare of light, with bodies and faces, with voices, music and the remembrance of play. Cezanne was quick to anger, quicker to be in a natural vision.

The window is open to the windy street. Nature dances even in a coffee shop. I spilled hot water on my hand from my mother's iron on the day of her memorial. The skin peels away like sunburn.

Wearing a frilly dress, she pulls at her straps, she reads the paper, she drinks a latte, and nothing of that conjures a poem. Desire is thought a prod and a spur to poetry, but poetry populates desire like memory does to the emptied out past and the vacant future.

This moment is unbroken, whether her dress is on the floor or out the door. No desire is necessary in this play. No death interrupts the real. The love I have sought from others is nowhere else to be found.

I live in a rich man's house, where time is like a buffet for everyone's use, a ball game on the lawn, books scattered throughout the rooms. It's as quiet as an arboretum or the cabin of a boat idling at sea. Here I forget how poor I am, but my poverty believes this house is in someone else's name, but it's my house, I built this house, it was given to me.

Overcast Bright Sky

Babes in arms, singles, groups, pairs, working, chatting, tattoos,
Jewelry, puffy felt wall hangings, everyone intent on some subject
or none at all, overcast bright sky, 1930s band playing like a comic
chorus, a mother gives cookie pieces to her small boys, piano blues
from the 40s, the barista has a blue pencil behind his ear.

I don't know how to be a poet. It's a mystery to me. I never learned
a way to write the spirit. I see with reversible eyeballs. Sometimes
I catch the dark behind my eyes, illuminated like a room where
I sit with all these people on a cool Wednesday afternoon.

Nighttime is a unifier. The sun burns us apart not together. Artificial
light doesn't compete for our separate souls. The descending darkness
embraces every one of us. It coolly comforts and unites the heart.

In the blazing sun, we seek the shade. In the shade we let go of
Seeking, and care is creative, especially in the stillness of the night.

Climbing the Hills

Watch any man turn into a blithering idiot to enjoy himself and call it love. I miss those days climbing the hills to shoot crows.

There was a time when I knew very little. Everything looked bigger. I had heroes. How foolishly I jumped and shouted in their worship.

Now I live on the prairie. The echo is deafening. Sound runs away when you finally listen. It makes hearing so alone and private it's outside yourself.

This Endless Life

Some people smile, no matter what. A mother's husband sits with his arms crossed, his twinkling eyes in a gesture of pain. His big smiling rawboned son finds a table for the three of them, in this café on the street that leads to the street that leads to other streets. A happy family pokes about in a world of poking families.

Everyone's wearing clothes they got up this morning and put on shoes and glasses and rings and watches and pens in their pockets, We get grocery carts and back packs and bags and then we turn gray or go bald, it's the way of the world.

1920s French music, a nine-year-old guitarist sits in with the band. My six-month-old glasses don't work as well as they did. I pretend everyone is far away and there's smoke in the air, this endless life.

My friend who died was alive in this endless life, not at this table, she danced on a table of her choosing. I loved her until she died.

My car pretended to die today, coughed and got better. The mechanic and I laughed, and I drove here, listening to the ball game on the radio. this tabletop is cold, not strong enough for dancing, this endless life.

There are poems about death none written in death there are poems about love none written in love since love can't write neither can death but love lost and the death of another are common as fear and doubt but love and death are not as self-revealing

Love and death are alive in the absence of every thought even in the absence of every beautiful poem see for yourself in this endless life.

No More Goddesses

A card player in a red bowling shirt, Ace of Spades on the back.
Cezanne said, *Paint goddesses, and you cease to paint women.*

I want to find a room with a wide-open floor above a café where
I can wake up, walk the floor and come down for a cup of coffee.

I went into the street and looked back to see if my dream was here,
but this is a one-story building. Regardless, I live where I dream
in a café below my home above. Cezanne worked standing up.

Open as the door, the window, the book, the face of the sandwich,
the cut on the tip of my finger. In this kind of café, my expectations
are not clouded by experience. Here there's no future bound to a past.
Here the present sits by the open door. There's no word for this room
of possibility but *open* will do to begin it.

The Greening

My mother died, and for two weeks I saw no sign of its blossom or its decay. I saw it settle in me a kind of fertility like water in the cracks. My orphanage stretches across time, but the old building crumbled, and from her foundation, I see its greening.

In the closeness of blood, the closeness is sacrosanct, but when someone of blood dies, something of the sacrosanct dies with them. One becomes less bound to the center. Disintegration begins to appear.

If I spend months painting her portrait, does the depth of concentration reveal its subject, or is she known and shown in the quick glimpse of a brush stroke? Do we lose the honor of our intentions in the speed of our dying or is all speed the same, when all of existence comes present in a brief moment, and a life is gone just that soon?

Feeling Around for Wonders

If you live among people, even barely, some think you have accomplished something. It is the ambition of foundlings.
The gentle raucous party music gives way to a ballad of lost love,
lost gloves left out on the table at night and found again in the morning.

The light from the street unites us all in a common glow, but the dogs
passing by prefer to smell the world, like fingers in a barrel of surprises.

I read Van Gogh, and my empathetic identification is easy as sunlight
falling on a sunflower. I'm as intimate as he was with loves and lovers.

In this day and night café, suffering is no more my plight than his. We
fall from love, not into it. A disabled boy hugs his father's neck in the
complicity of their flesh. His red head bobs, rises, falls, he lies at peace.

In this long and narrow café, a rising sense comforts me. There was
sunshine yesterday and today, instead of being its dreary usurper,
the rain is the sunlight's close companion. I hug my absent father
until he hugs me back and we love each other, long past dying.

This Distant City

I read the Haight Ashbury Literary Journal and recall poets talking to each other, within earshot of anyone interested, being serious, jumping, leaping, having fun with truth, being true to our common lies.

The subject of each poem is an easy self, happy to speak for the one speaking or anyone passing the page on their way to somewhere else.

Such complicity is refreshing, here in this distant city of private isolation. It reminds me of the joys of the solitary life, conducted among friends.

The Journal opens wide like a newspaper, and all the news that throws a fit, it prints. Its printed voices turn inward. Here, the room turns quiet, and each of us goes wherever we go, when the room is safe.

The door is open and the cool air outside mixes with the warm air inside, the way the cool self mixes with the warm spirit and turns itself inside out.

In the Place of Being Still

I sit in one place to see what happens, to see how much of the world might show up in my eyes. It's always a good idea, when I make a decision, right after the decision has made itself known to me.

The moment of sitting in one place is like being between imagining the love of your life out there and seeing that love come through the door, knowing it's come to join you in the place of being still.

It's not my desire to be sad, but I have been, and I didn't notice it, until it stopped, when I came here. What a disaster of history. It's the end of an era that went largely unnoticed, until it was over. The past is reflected upon, when the present lets go of its old self.

The problem with going out every night, expecting to make love to someone, even with a long string of successes, or because of it, one misses the opportunity to have no idea what constitutes love.

One never learns to distinguish love from love's familiar face, to look into the face of the unknown, to find the recognition of love looking back, to know love without any history of it occurring, without having to spend one's time trying to find it among its approximations.

Living in Love's Trajectory

I've written love poems in recognition of the love that's found in the absence of love's object, and if that were enough, I'd be done with poems written in love's trajectory, but that is where I have lived.

Born in the heart of love, I have lived in love's trajectory. I know, as an archer knows, arrows are not one's love and neither are their targets.

But what if love is motionless? What if desire doesn't seek out love but leaves love behind? What if love is motionless, and the only way to find it is to be still, with no desire to seek it? What if love exists in the effortless quiet of my being? What then, my poetic soul?

Her Wonderful Life

Father and daughter stand in line in Mesopotamia,
two thousand years before the Christian Era.

The girl holds a doll on a string, as her father guides
her forward, his hands on her small shoulders.

As they near the front, the music changes rhythm
and her father begins a gentle shuffling dance.

The girl smiles at her wonderful life.

This Common Café of Time

In the depth of field called this café, people occupy parts of the air with their vital presence. Imagine I'm showing you what I feel, in my being here. Imagine this room a painting, filled with pigmented time.

Inside the shock and wonder at the presence of life, every face evokes a persona we call by a name. We give these faces no more thought than animated clothing, or we treat them with fear and desire, but here in this thick-painted air, this division of eternity, this common café of time.

Can I tell you what it means to me in particular to be in a place where I feel welcome, not in doing or being anyone, but because water can't kick water out of itself, even when that might seem true everywhere, or even here, at another time in eternity?

Watching the Music

From the back of the room, everyone seems to be up front,
watching the musicians play music, or the music its musicians.

A wistful anticipation takes up the clarinet. A stern talking to blows
the trumpet. An invitation fingers the guitar. A salute thumbs the bass.
A quiet bliss wanders the room, open to whoever wants to join in.

I could neglect this simple life for a complicated imagination but
beneath the imagined complexity of life is a life as full if not fuller
than the one I see before me, but without its vexing complications.

A man wearing a beret, coat, scarf, and gloves eyes the list of
photographs that line the walls, and then he and his short-haired
wife leave the café, without looking at the pictures. They leave like
photographs in motion, like still-lives that got down off the wall.

In any café other than this one, poetry stands on the corner
with its thumb out. It's not that I can't write a poem, anywhere
else, but like any true love, this café has spoiled my desire
to lie with anyone else, in service of the truth about love.

The Sound of Their Music

I spoke in adult sentences before I was three. Having got that out of the way, I attended to the garble of gods, then to sheets of melodic noise, then to dogs barking, then to unaccented stillness. Then I wondered why a silent child was so intent on vocabulary.

A boy in a Basquiat T-shirt buys a piece of cake for his mother and a bottle of water for himself. He stops at a table of pretty girls. They talk about college, while behind them is a table of cross-dressers, one loud, one pretty, one not so pretty.

I'm drawn to a certain female. I imagine my hands on her hips in her silky dress. This is the way the world forms and disintegrates. All my sentences fracture when thought turns toward their origin. All my desires and fears are absorbed in the sound of their music.

The Name of the Band

The name of the band is Creole, gypsy jazz that rumbles,
swings, bounces, croons, with guitars, fiddle, bass, and snare.

People move their chairs like gusts of wind in a weeping willow.
Sad Willy wanders in and can't find sorrow anywhere.

The fiddler saws his music in half. The drummer Fred Astaires
his skins. The bass player grins. *I love you* is what people say
when the natural music in them calls out its own name.

The mouth of an envelope gets wider the farther in you shove your
hand. A breeze swirls in the wake of those walking back and forth.

Standing on ceremony is not caving in to civility. It's only a nod
in that direction. I stood stiffly at the counter and forgot which skin
I was wearing. The best answer is no skin. The sudden appearance
of awkwardness is like the sight of fresh snow to an eager skier.

There's scrambling before a concert, not in the band or the audience
but in the notes. The desire to form chords on short notice deifies their
nakedness. When we're undressed well, we're dressed up even better.

The Camouflage of Dance

There were no awkward moments when I drank. Now I look at the guitarist's bobbing foot, and a gap opens in my equanimity.

My lungs expand. My heart beats with high-steppin' moves. I fill myself outward from emptiness. My awkwardness doesn't portend welcome, but a big welcome may appear in its place.

Two sisters split my view of the band, as two old guys in dresses pass nonchalantly, their cavalier masculinity no barrier to the music.

This poem is like the label on a bottle of rum, it's words on paper that camouflage the camouflage, like nudity and costumery do to the body.

Spontaneous joy is contagious, like the smell of bread. Joyful music spills out of the air. It gets on everyone. Something grabs each person, like a strong grip on a tube of dough squeezes out a birthday cake.

Here comes Boston Charley, his hat pulled down, whistling like he's singing. It feels natural to be in love with this many people.

A pair of straight women dance together, their breasts lock, they pirouette as violin music climbs the wall like fast-moving ivy.

Never toss a poem away, until you're done with it, until it's like shedding clothing that's no longer necessary on the dance floor.

Sunburnt Dew

No better than instinct, the erratic blood of my heart takes aim at the air. From every pore, it attempts to break free of the skin.

I pluck words by an imprecise knowledge from the din, and if I don't listen, I can't hear the silence that gives language its blood.

A woman with large ears, her hair pulled back, rubs her eyes and looks kindly at her boyish companion. Straights get along better when there are gays around, like a buffer and a guide.

A girl's T-shirt reads *Pleasure Victim*. She seems less victim than observer. What if Gutenberg's first press had not been for printing Bibles but for the annotation of our passing days. A famous painter has gotten rich putting paint on the surface of his charming and homey mass-marketed prints. *It makes them come alive*, he says.

I wonder about these things, until I fall into the unprinted moment. My unpainted eyes open, as if I were no more than sunburnt dew.

The Cool Breeze in the Warm Night Air

I grabbed my soccer shoes and headed down to Memorial Stadium for a Monday Night game, but no one showed up and the schedule said the game was next week. I found two sealed bottles of non-fat chai on the sidewalk across from the PBS station. I wondered about the effect the ibuprofen I'd already taken might have on an unexercised body.

Tonight, the cool breeze wafts in through the open door, like a tall thin blond, sitting in with the band. Back in the day when the guitar was not a solo instrument, it was played like a brace of silver-shod horses, climbing the many flights of a velvet staircase in the rain, but that was before the effects of ibuprofen were as well-known.

The music moves up and down the street, it pulls people out of doors to see who strides so gainfully in such a poor district. Everyone feels prosperous in the rain of musical banknotes. A small boy runs in the road, into the open arms of a rich life ahead of him, thanks to the musicians who leave their wealth behind wherever they go.

*Have you ever been an artist's model? I thought to ask a woman.
Instead I ask myself Am I ready to repopulate beauty with reality?*

*Am I ready to draw the line that reunites form with the invisible?
am I ready to engage in the presence of absence that undefines art?*

*Am I ready to hold up my end of the bargain that I strike
in the asking? Am I ready to lift the brush of my own answer?*

The warm night air occupies the room like light.
The light occupies the room like warm night air.

The Center for Wooden Boats

I went to a birthday gathering at the Center for Wooden Boats. It was a party Bob was throwing for his girlfriend Dawn. It was my job to share the alienation Bob felt among his new relatives. I talked to a banker about his retirement and a young couple about their baby, and then I left I picked up my coat and I left.

I wandered the pier, looking at the boats, and then I drove away. I couldn't stay. I left my discomfort in the air, and I drove away. There are courtesies for disarming such a situation, but I chose not to engage them. I walked up the ramp and unlocked my truck.

I got in, put my seatbelt on, and drove away, when I could have made my goodbyes, shaken hands, and bowed out gracefully. I re-entered the traffic, and I came to where I feel at ease.

A barista asked what was up, and when I told her, she said *I'm glad to hear I'm not the only one who does that* I said *I'd rather be here than there, and so, here I am.* This is way a poet becomes prosaic to save himself from unrelieved and unspoken despair.

When the Carter Family sang, there was a melancholy embrace, a sweet majesty, a cry that rose above the relentless loss, a song of the soul that holds the defeated heart in its comforting hands.

The Carters' high lament casts a nearly invisible thread upon the wind and when the light catches it, you can go blind with its unfettered joy.

Keep on the sunny side, always on the sunny side, keep on the sunny side of life, it will help you on your way, it will brighten every day, if you keep on the sunny side of life.

The Sunbaked Dust

Scrabble players compete, under cartoony paintings with bright Colors. A barista gives me free coffee. *You're a grandpa*, he says.

My daughter had a daughter, who might be called Ava. They want to see if the name suits her. I went to the hospital when my daughter was halfway in labor. *I'm tired*, she said, *we've been working hard*.

Her husband and the labor coach were there. It felt like a cult of the unborn, like a dark cell of baby conjurers. I kissed my daughter, hugged my son-in-law, shook hands with the counselor, and left.

I'd stormed the citadel of life. My son envies me my stolen minutes in the inner sanctum that we have both been spun off from. It's an ancient story, and love is no part of it. We are spinning tops among spinning tops, glancing circles of collision and separation, until the swirling winds die down in the sunbaked dust of time.

To carry a poet's mind or an artist's eye is simply to hold onto a simple way, longer than expected. The back wall of the building across the street is a Hundertwasser of sunbleached brick.

To be an artist is to sit in the peace of perception that's youthful, or scorned, or free, or all three. I saw a part of the wall for sale, as an overpriced print in a frame, and here's the original, paintless and priceless. Look at the way the colors climb around that window.

I Sit in the Company Of

Was I looking at sadness or wariness, the same as mine,
this is a belt-buckle street, there's marrow in the bone. I drift
into thoughtlessness. I sink into the deep pond colors of cold tea.

In this long narrow room, figures move its length. They cross it.
They step in and out of it, like a pathway, like being seen through
one eye, where mundanity is telescoped to a drama of serenity.

A small dark woman sits low in the corner. Her eyes engage
at a distance equal to her inner reflection. I suspect her wariness
is not weary but watchful, a careful protection of the bloom
in the bud, and I think to myself, *I sit in the company of.*

I'm recognizable by the company I keep, as motion is seen in stillness,
like a dog at the opera, like colors in the water, like *here* in what seemed
like *there* for the longest time. I sit in the company of *here*, where I once
sat in the company of *there*. I'm here, by the company I keep.

On the wall are paintings of war. These walls have come around
again. These are times that reveal the tender and texture of our base
and finer nature/ What is the voice buried in our chatter. What is vital
in our vitality? Is there deep blue in a sky without darkness.

It's been hot for weeks. A smiling dog is simply a dog with its mouth open.
Pet the dog's head and his ears go back, not necessarily a sign of malice.

I thought I'd age, happily adrift in the whole, but once in a while
a stranger will walk up to you on the street and hand you a million dollars.
Only a suspicious mind would complain about the weight of the money,
or the pinch of the string-tied bundle. I have a suspicious mind.

Don't think I'm in love with you because you too are open to being
in love. We're walking in the blood of our ancestors, none of us is
alone, and I am not your lover.

How to Write a Book of Poems

First, you make a list of subject matter.
Wait a second. Hold it. Did I say subject matter,
like brain matter, the stuff forensic scientists
scrape off walls to find out who got killed?

Skip the list. You don't have a list. In fact,
you've got nothing. And good luck to you.