The Road between Cemeteries

Richard Paul Foss

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THE ROAD BETWEEN CEMETERIES

by

Richard Paul Foss

A Dissertation
Submitted to the
Faculty of The Graduate College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Department of English
Dr. Nancy Eimers, Advisor

Western Michigan University
Kalamazoo, Michigan
April 2007
The Road Between Cemeteries is a creative dissertation, a book of poems that makes use of many various forms and styles. I am interested in both the lyric and the narrative traditions and the heart of this collection, I believe, lies in the space between; the narrative is the road, moving inexorably forward, and the lyric, the passenger dreaming, questioning out the window. I am also interested in contemporary relationships, both those of a private nature such as we have with our parents, spouses, children, and those of a public nature, such as with our heroes in literature, sports and music.

A main question the poems wrestle with is how we as humans face the inevitability of our own mortality and the mortality of those we hold dear in both the private and public sphere. Therefore, there are a number of elegies and would-be elegies in the collection that contemplate the permanence and wonder of death, especially in an age when traditional cures such as religion have lost command. A second thematic strand is the question of identity. I am interested in how we define ourselves to ourselves, to others, and how our relative connection or disconnection from other people as well as our past history informs that conception of identity. These poems assert that, though these are difficult questions, often irresolvable mysteries that strain our abilities to live meaningful lives, there is hope, a dignity in
making the endeavor, and that the very act of the artist, in this case the poet, can create, out of chaos, meaning. These poems arm themselves with insights from the past, observations concerning the present and, with these tools, surge forward (with more than a little anxiety) to peek in the fogged over windows of the future.
for my daughter,
Zoey Katherine,
and my wife Anastasia
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost I would like to thank Nancy Eimers for her steady encouragement and her careful and thoughtful reading of my work and for her remarkable and well-known editing skills. I would also like to thank Bill Olsen who taught me new and surprising ways to look at a poem and how to re-conceive what my own might become. Herb Scott was a wonderful teacher whose calm spirit helped ease anxiety and inspire confidence. I wish I had more time to know him. I’d like to thank all of the professors at Western Michigan University for taking my understanding of literature to new levels, especially Jill Larson, Grace Tiffany, Nic Witchi, John Saillant and Marc Richardson. I’d like to thank Heather Addison for taking time out of her hectic schedule to be an advisor on this work.

I was fortunate to have worked with many fine writers and thinkers in the WMU creative writing program and I would like to thank all of them for their honest feedback, especially Mike Nelson, Maryanne Swierenga and Kirsten Hemmy. I would like to acknowledge the thoughtful and perceptive reading of Therese LeCompte, who tirelessly looked at draft upon draft of most every poem in this dissertation and for the value she helped me find there. Thanks to Beth McDermott for taking time away from her own poetry to help make mine better. Thanks as well to Marc Singer, Edwin Rozic, Lisa Greer and Diane Collins for reading my work and offering their very usable insights.
Thanks to Stan Plumly whose voice I still hear resonating with every poem I attempt.

Thanks to my family for their love, support. I'd especially like to thank my parents, Kitty and Rich Foss, Sr., for their warm dedication and their fine example. I am lucky to have someone as wonderful, witty and supportive as my wife Anastasia; without her this dissertation would never have come to fruition.

Richard Paul Foss
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INTRODUCTION

"I painted my name on the back of a leaf
And I watched it float away.
The hope I had in a notebook full of white, dry pages
Was all I tried to save;
But the wind blew me back via Chicago."
- Jeff Tweedy, "Via Chicago"

I don't quite understand poetry. After years and years of reading, of taking dozens of courses on the master poets, of participation in dozens of poetry workshops where I worked my own craft and helped numerous others work theirs, poetry remains a mystery. I appreciate poetry, am moved by poetry; poetry makes me wonder and think; poetry creates a space and a vehicle by which I can come to understand other humans and human behavior. But how poetry can do all of this, how it works – that knowledge has eluded me. Of course I know some of what makes poetry effective, but I often feel I know far more, can speak with more confidence, about fiction, music, film, for instance, than I can about poetry. In my role as a creative writing teacher, I have been keenly aware of the levels of confidence I have when advising students about their fiction versus advising them about their poetry. How to improve the fiction is almost always clear, whereas I often look at my own suggestions regarding student poems and feel uneasy, apprehensive. Perhaps this is because with poetry there are so many more choices. A prose writer has the sentence, but the poet has the sentence and the line. With contemporary poetry there are limitless ways a poem can be formed on the page. Often I will look at a poem that has been spread out over the page, making use of caesuras and indentations, floating
its phrases over to the unknown country of the right margin and I am hard pressed to figure out where the meaning lies in such a formation. How does forming the poem in such a way shape how readers feel about the topic of the poem? In the end, I believe one of the reasons I write poetry is because I seek to understand its magic and its power; although, in many ways, I hope I never fully see beyond that curtain.

As an undergraduate I was a fiction writer and only ended up writing poetry because somehow I had taken all the later fiction writing classes before ever taking the initial creative writing class, where students were asked to write both fiction and poetry. Before this class most all of the poetry I had been exposed to came from distant centuries and countries. But in this class, I was introduced to a book called *Generation 2000*, an anthology of poetry, which included Albert Goldbarth, Wendell Berry, Raymond Carver, Marge Piercy, Louise Gluck, Charles Wright, Heather McHugh and Stanley Plumly. This book showed me a new kind of poetry that fit my frame of reference, was about the world that I lived. It was contemporary; it was written by living Americans, breathing the same air as me. The poets in this book showed me what poetry could be: poetry could be sexy, conversational, irreverent, funny. Poetry didn’t have to use end-rhyme and could be shaped on the page in countless ways. To this day, when I sit down to write, poems from the pages of *Generation 2000* leap from memory and swirl in my mind, such as Goldbarth’s “All Nite Donuts,” Plumly’s “Infidelity,” and “Now that My Father Lay Down Beside Me,” Heather McHugh’s “Centerfold Reflected in Jet Window,” and Charles Wright’s “Blackwater Mountain.” These poems showed me what was possible, how
to write poems in the late twentieth century. Goldbarth’s “All Nite Donuts,”
especially struck me as a keen commentary on contemporary urban American life, a
poem not possible in the time of Keats, or even Frost.

Poetry to me is both a tool to mine memory, experience, the larger world for
meaning, and a place to create powerful, intimate and skillful expressions of the
poet’s vision, of whatever he or she has turned to look at. I admire Shelly’s romantic
conception of the poet as being one of the few humans who can, standing on the flat
Earth, see to the top of the mountain, though the trees, through the mist to glimpse the
divine and the terrible, and then, using poetry, translate for the rest of us. There is at
least a bit of truth here. I do believe that poetry, like all art, is meant to strive toward
wisdom and then to express that wisdom with beauty.

In my poems, as I strive toward some bit of wisdom, I instinctually gravitate
toward the narrative tradition. I’ve always loved stories, stories of all kinds, told
through a variety of mediums, including poetry. But this instinct toward narrative has
been difficult as most poetry workshops are biased toward the lyric tradition. Stan
Plumly, who I studied under in Maryland, used to say, when he saw success in my
revisions, that I was “defeating the narrative nicely.” An important reason narrative
has been so central in my approach comes from my discomfort with the modern and
post-modern lyric poem. I like getting the whole story. Once, as a kid, I read Hugo’s
*Les Miserables*. I was moved by the novel and proud of myself for completing and
understanding a novel that was supposed to be too difficult for me. Then, I remember
how angry I felt when I learned that the story had been abridged, and that I had
missed over 500 pages of the actual novel. I want the whole story and I want to understand every part of it. Plus, there is comfort in narrative, in the insistence of time moving every forward, in the relief of causality, one event leading to the next. Of course, one can never have the whole of any story. But modern, post-modern, contemporary lyric poems so often evade distillation, eschewing clarity, making more use of ambiguity in their poems. Encountering these poems tested my impulse to always figure it out, to wring out meaning from the cloth of language.

I’ve seen my growth as a poet progress as I learned to accept that uncertainty and live within that ambiguity. This is my understanding of Keat’s concept of negative capability: the writer’s ability to stay inside that which bewilders and confuses, resisting the temptation of conclusion or distillation in order to achieve deeper insight. This negative capability allows the poet to deepen his/her understanding of whatever is under contemplation. Though I am probably still largely a narrative poet, I’ve been able to develop my abilities writing lyrics as well, such as in the poems: “Ode to People Who Wave,” “On Deciding to Become an Organ Donor,” and “The Weightlifter,” to name a few. In my narrative poems, I’ve become much more comfortable limiting the narrative, reducing exposition to leave only what is elemental, essential for the poem’s power to become manifest.

Robert Frost’s famous comment that he wrote poetry for “people who buy books in the thousands” represents an ideal I hold dear. Ours is a specialized society. Chemists attend chemistry conventions and only poets, or would-be poets, attend poetry readings. This is a shame. And as a result, poets often craft their poems to
move that specialized audience: other poets. I try to avoid meta-poetry, try to avoid 
writing poems that exclude readers. I am not interested, as many are, in creating 
poetry that requires a Masters degree in English to enjoy or appreciate. I want to write 
poems that are readable to the average person, if there is such a person. At the same 
time, though clarity is an important value, I still expect my poems to challenge 
readers, to invite careful reading.

I have always been an autobiographical poet; following strictly the mantra 
‘write what you know,’ I wrote almost exclusively about events of my personal life. I 
crafted poems as a way to confront uncertainty, to counteract the influence of fear in 
my life. Poems in this collection deal with how to achieve and maintain intimacy 
with others. What does that intimacy mean in our lives? What and how do we mean 
to each other? I write about this theme in “Skin,” “Voice of a Thousand Geese,” 
“Ode to People Who Wave,” “Expectant” and “Thanksgiving With Rose” to name a 
few. Also poems in this collection, as so many poems do, face the issue of self- 
definition – how do we come to know the self? “When My Neighbor Frankie…,” 
“The Garter Snake Club” and “Player Piano” are examples of poems that explore the 
nature of the forging of identity. A third theme in the collection deals with facing 
mortality, as in “The Weightlifter,” “Eating Lunch With My Father,” and the title 
poem, “The Road Between Cemeteries, Memorial Day.”

But at some point, focusing on the self became claustrophobic and I began to 
think about creating poems that looked outward. In the past few years I’ve opened 
the aperture and pointed my lens outward, further a field. Writing poems such as,
“Gaper's Delay,” “Mary and Jesus, a Fragment,” “I Must Have Heard the Shot,” “Death Tolls,” and “Johnny Cash at the Gates of Heaven” was liberating, allowing me to explore different ideas. I will always write about my personal life, but I think it vital to make poems from what lies beyond my door.

There are so many influences on my writing, but many of these influences are not poets. I find influence in somewhat unlikely places for a poet: in the lyrics of rock songs, in intelligent television shows, sports contests, pulp novels and in films. I am an avid novel reader and I have been keenly aware of the influence of Hemingway, Faulkner and Graham Greene (along with numerous others) in my writing. I am mesmerized by the highly crafted, powerful stories of Raymond Carver, how he communicates so much with such sparse prose. Film and television have taught me a good deal about image, dialogue and pacing as well as so much more that I cannot quite name. There are too many film-makers to name here.

Then of course there are the poets who have influenced my work and how I approach the crafting of poetry. Older poets such as Wordsworth, Shakespeare, Keats, Thomas Hardy and Yeats have had a profound effect on my writing. As an Irish-American, William Butler Yeats has been very important to me. “Among School Children,” “Second Coming,” and “Easter 1916,” are a few of the poems of Yeats that have stayed with me. The refrain of the latter, “a terrible beauty is born” is heartbreakingly beautiful and I remember, the tragic elegance of “An Irish Airmen Forsees His Death”: “I balanced all, brought all to mind / The years to come seemed waste of breath, / A waste of breath the years behind / In balance with this life, this
death." I appreciate the way the imagery and lineation in this poem suggest the wings of the plane, the balance between life and death. I love too how Yeats ends so many of his poems with profound questions to spur the reader beyond the poem, such as "how can we know the dancer from the dance?" from the end of "Among School Children."

I've always found the poems of Robert Frost and T.S. Eliot intriguing and, to paraphrase a critic on Frost, terrifying. Eliot has the reputation for being more cerebral, more philosophical and Frost for being more earthly, but I have found in equal measure the opposite in each. Every time I read "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" I find something new and engaging. The lines "I should have been a pair of ragged claws/ scuttling across the floors of silent seas" are stunning, as Prufrock renounces his own humanity, wishing to remove himself as far as possible from the community of people. Robert Frost, like Yeats, uses rhyme in such a seamless way, subconsciously pulling the reader through the poem. I dip into Frost's *Collected Poems* for ideas and inspiration, like many people dip into the *Bible*. I especially am moved by Frost's dramatic, narrative poems such as "Death of the Hired Man," "Servant to Servants," and "Home Burial," where Frost brilliantly positions his characters in the tableau to underscore the difference of perspective between participants in the same tragedy, how painful it is to not be understood.

Of course I've spent a lot of time with contemporary poets whose influence I find particularly important because we share, or more closely share the same world, have the same frame of reference. I love the images found in Elizabeth Bishop. In
Robert Lowell I’ve admired the weight of history, the seriousness and density of his poetry that challenge me to be smarter. Sylvia Plath’s poems, especially those in her last collection, *Ariel*, chill me to the bone. For instance, the title poem about horse riding, the phrasing is stripped down, much like in Emily Dickinson, to its most essential elements:

> And now I
  Foam to wheat, a glitter of seas.
  The child's cry
>
  Melts in the wall.
  And I
  Am the arrow,
>
  The dew that flies,
  Suicidal, at one with the drive
  Into the red
>
  Eye, the cauldron of morning.

Here the enjambments create multiple meanings and urge the reader inexorably forward to conclusion. There is such a fierce elegance to her craft and the haunting voice that she achieves. James Wright, Phillip Larkin, Stanley Plumly, Louise Gluck and Richard Hugo are all poets who I visit often and I appreciate what I find in the rooms they’ve created. Since image is a predominant feature of my poetry, Richard Hugo’s place poems have been a particular useful resource. One gem that stands out is the tragic “Death of the Kapowsin Tavern,” where “Nothing dies as slowly as a scene,” the death of a tavern symbolizing the death of a small town – “wind / that blew the neon out six years before,/ simply ended lots of ending.”
In recent years I’ve tried to add an element of wit to my poems and the poets Billy Collins, Neal Bowers, Bill Matthews, Mark Halliday and John Berryman are poets who have shown me some paths, some methods for how this might be done.

Music too has been an elemental influence on my writing. Actually, it was the words I found in song – not poetry – that had me take the first steps toward becoming a poet. I saw then as I see now well-crafted and powerful poetry in the words of rock’s singer-songwriters. Since I was 13 years old, when I held a tape recorder to my parent’s clock-radio to capture the mysterious words and sounds of rock music from the air, and then faithfully transcribing the words in notebooks, I’ve been fascinated with how words could be put together to create powerful images, tell intriguing stories and stir thoughts and emotions. As I scribbled out these words on the page I tried to judge where the lines were, how the phrases would be grouped. I made judgments about which phrases, which rhymes, which images were the most striking and thought about how the weaker examples might be improved.

By far, the songwriter who has had the most influence on me is Bruce Springsteen. From Springsteen I’ve drawn lessons integral to poetry: the importance of creating unique and striking images, how to tell a story, how meaning can best be conferred through intimation, and concision. As regard to the latter, the ability of a poet to crystallize language is perhaps what is most at the heart of poetry. I saw this in songs such as “Born in the USA,” a bitter song about a Vietnam veteran returning to America and finding a different country than the one he left: “Come back home to the refinery/ Hiring man says ‘Son if it was up to me.’ / Went down to see my V.A.
man/ He said "Son, don't you understand." The concision here is impressive, how
Springsteen, in four short lines, encapsulates the precise nature of the America
returning Vietnam soldiers had to endure.

    Bruce Springsteen’s lyrics create a deep and evocative sense of place. Many
of his songs suggest a novel’s worth of material, call to mind deep folds of story,
layers of meaning. For instance, in his song “Youngstown,” he evokes the sad history
of the Ohio town:

    Well my daddy come on the Ohio works
    When he come home from World War two
    Now the yards just scrap and rubble
    He said, "Them big boys did what Hitler couldn't do"
    These mills they built the tanks and bombs
    That won this country's wars
    We sent our sons to Korea and Vietnam
    Now we're wondering what they were dyin' for

    Here in Youngstown
    Here in Youngstown
    My sweet Jenny, I'm sinkin' down
    Here darlin' in Youngstown

    From the Monongahela valley
    To the Mesabi iron range
    To the coal mines of Appalacchia
    The story's always the same
    Seven-hundred tons of metal a day
    Now sir you tell me the world's changed
    Once I made you rich enough
    Rich enough to forget my name

    These sad lines use image, rhyme and phrasing to create a poignant capsule of the
history of this town and a harsh indictment of those in power in America who use
young American men as cannon fodder and company pawns to expand political and
economic power. In another song a man who feels himself utterly isolated from his community steals a car in a desperate attempt to find some connection: “And I'm driving a stolen car / Down on Eldridge Avenue / Each night I wait to get caught / But I never do.” The starkness of image, the simple, graceful phrasing, the sincerity is found in most all of Bruce Springsteen’s lyrics, many of which I believe could stand, stripped of their guitars and drums, alone as poetry.

There are many songsmiths who I could discuss here, but I will name two more who have had a prevailing effect on my writing: Elvis Costello and Jeff Tweedy. Elvis Costello, an experimental songwriter, crafts songs in both the narrative and lyric tradition with intricate phrasing and vocabulary that extends far beyond the typical range of rock and roll music. For instance, in the song “Beyond Belief,” Costello writes: “I'm just an honest slick / In a windup world with a nervous tick / In a very fashionable hovel / I hang around dying to be tortured / You'll never be alone in the bone orchard / This battle with the bottle is nothing so novel.” The word play, the rhyme and clever wit is quintessential Elvis Costello. The speaker becomes a “slick,” a word that suggests oil slick, danger, living in a world fragile as a child’s toy. The words “windup” and “tick” also suggest a clock, suggesting that time is running out for the speaker, and perhaps humankind as well.

Jeff Tweedy writes for the band Wilco, creating songs in the lyric tradition, often short on image, but with surprising and meaningful turns of phrase rich with possibility. For instance, in the song “Jesus Etc.,” Tweedy turns both the romantic and religious view of the image of stars inside out:
Jesus, don't cry
You can rely on me honey
You can combine anything you want
I'll be around
You were right about the stars
Each one is a setting sun

Tall building shake
Voices escape singing sad sad songs
Tuned to chords strung down your cheeks
Bitter melodies turning your orbit around

Here stars stray from their traditional role of mysterious objects of inspiration and become symbols of sadness, of the pall that surrounds the speaker and his beloved in the song. I love the surreal image of guitar strings “strung down” the woman’s cheeks, as the notes of the song manifest themselves as physical reality. I love how the opening line seems to suggest a kind of prayer, a direct address to Jesus, but on closer inspection, the speaker is taking the Lord’s name in vain, a desperate plea of the speaker to his lover. Similarly, the phrase “turning your orbit around” could be read in many ways and this rich, original, suggestive language is what recommends Tweedy as wordsmith.

In the end, I believe that poetry and that which inspires poem-making, can be found almost anywhere. My poems, whether they fall under the lyric tradition or the narrative, seek to find answers to questions we all, as humans, face. I look forward to continuing my development as a poet, exploring forms and strategies, opening further that aperture to create more poems that are less personal, less auto-biographical. I am excited about the possibilities, what wisdom I might achieve in the process and what poems, yet unwritten, that might come to express it.
Gaper's Delay

It's what traffic reporters call it, on the radio, when they deride
us for slowing our cars to see someone crushed by the hurry

of highway, eyes off our road, necks twisted toward opposing traffic,
craning to get as much of the blood, as much of the howling,
scent of burning metal, gasoline; woman twitching, draped

across the yellow line or heap under white sheet. But what we get

is usually inconvenience: two drivers shaking their heads,

checking fenders for chipped paint; no flashing lights, no emergency

vehicles shooting up the shoulder intravenously. Of course,

the idiots all want a look, they say, high in their helicopters like gods.

I'd like to pull them down from their sky, get them in close to gape hard at the man being

cut from the crushed Cadillac, the jaws of life shearing the mangled metal, perception

papered over with real dying, reaching his arms toward

any other place. See we're the ones pinned to the pavement like insects on display;
we’re the ones vanishing into the back
of the ambulance, disappearing,

into the hands of the blue and white our children,
us too hurt to care. So who wouldn’t brake, lean
toward the smoke, gather what intelligence
a moment can gather before

accelerating back into life? Still,
under our backs those stubborn shards

of shattered glass, the rubber heavy breath
of the bearing semi, remain. We need
to look because it’s always us, late for baseball,
late for the boss, late for home, broken

on the road, gaping at the others across
the divide, wide-mouthed and untouched, moving on.
At The Green Top

"Ain't no top like the Green Top"
-written on the men's room wall above the urinal

What can you say about the grizzled patrons
who lean and sway against the mahogany
like a gurney they might climb into?
They carry a kind of deadness in the eye,
haggard, wizened, outdated, unloved —
failure hangs from their cheeks and jowls
but look how they look through you, these bar-room
philosophers. Like dead come back
with something to tell, terrible, myth-breaking.

The heart of downtown, it beats barely
enough to register, to be noticed —
too low, perhaps even for end time's
shoulder-tapping angels; apocalypse —
you get the feeling a drink wouldn't spill,
the lights dim or anyone leave their seat
if the rapture were to roll down downtown Kalamazoo. Tucked brick storefront,
windows that refuse light, faded letters
on the door promise 'air conditioning' — the place
is barely there.

And every one walks in alone
each night, Christmas, Thanksgiving, Sundays.
No tree, no lights. None but hard florescence,
the one TV's buzzing blue flickering baseball.
It's 1978 in here: dark brown paneling, yellowed, suspended
ceiling; Budweiser and Miller signs, chrome and mirror,
the rust-colored carpet veined with once silver duct tape —
dotted with stains of all shapes and origins, black
cock roaches.

They always come here, where the smoke blackens you
from the inside. They play pool. Strange
how much it matters —
your ability to poke porcelain balls into pockets,
your ability to hold the table against
anyone who might challenge.

Serve yourself.

There are no waitresses.
No short skirt flirtation; the lust is as muted
as the violence; they hang just out of tasting
reach of the forgetting pools. Who can catalog
the pain? What would it mean to do so?

Here they let the darknesses in. I sit with mine
watching the clouds drift over the white light
of the juke box that holds my last two songs.

I'm talking with Maggie Stiles,
whom the bartender tells me is on night leave
from a hospital. Schizophrenia. You can see it:
Jagged teeth, her frayed hair. That broken
look in the eyes. She works me
for drinks, cigarettes, all kinds of assurances.
I usually avoid her, as if I could catch,
but tonight I want a walk inside there.

You're beautiful, Maggie,
I tell her, knowing no one will ever touch her
the way we need to be touched . . .
Maggie, nightly freed from her drafty museum to get
a look at the weigh station that comes just before.

This isn't purgatory –
to what heaven could you stumble to from here?

I've made friends with the forty-eight-year-old
bus boy who seems he could never exist
anywhere but between these panels. He staggers
as if on broken legs, his eyes hardly winning
the fight to stay open. We play the felt and he always wins.
I've never seen him sober, don't see how he can live
much longer, and I tell him, "Mark, you need to take it easy;"
I tell him, "Don't come here tomorrow."

I fist the cue like a sword, the cold sweat
of the Jameson's edging the green felt field,
enduring the naked plaintiveness
of Keith Richard's guitar on "It's Only Rock and Roll."
Why do we always come here, hunch the same
on the same bar stools?
to win, be seen winning –
running the table, knocking the eight
off the far bumper, getting through
the sexless romance of two dollar whiskies,
the days that stack like the green plastic chairs?
On Deciding to Become an Organ Donor

When I decide to sign the back of my license, circle all organs, all tissues I try not to think of the continuous coma, or grisly car wreck – enough to kill me, blast out my soul, but leave my liver, my eyes, my lungs, etc. alive. This is not easy: making the move from me to human storehouse of spare parts, carved up like a Sunday roast, separated into a dozen Igloo coolers and rushed to awaiting helicopters bound for Topeka, Miami, Boulder.

But why not? They who survive will come anyway, divvy up my books, my clothes – what portion of me be assignable, as it were. Why not give all? So I sign. Help life (somebody’s) go on.

My wife as witness signs, giving a look that says: But don’t. And I can’t help thinking as I give away both kidneys, heart, pancreas, miles of blue vein like highways on a map, both hands (can they do hands?) – what else of me might the receiver receive? Do visions of my naked wife accompany my corneas as they open a world of light and color for a woman in Boston? Do the bruises of flesh, the body’s remembrance of kicks and punches, survive the transfer?

Think of the day we’re able to bequeath something less tangible, organs of the metaphysical – donations of sense of humor or saxophone talent, extraordinary knack for finding perfect gifts for impossible people, or better, a less taxed or newly cleared conscience. I might donate my unparalleled parallel parking abilities or my hefty collection of memorized movie lines, properly intoned. Your famous common sense could be surgically
implanted into some wayward teenager
from Brooklyn with too many tattoos
and childhood; Aunt Jenny’s kind heartedness –
apart from the heart itself, which, ironically,
going, to that insurance guy from Duluth –
could be given to a politician or CEO.
Or better still, faith, faith in a god with a capital “g”,
Christ’s salvation surgically scalpeled,
sewn neatly into someone’s lonely soul.

Who knows what the future might bring –
with doctors finding new ways to cut and paste
from Bill to Maryanne, Jessica to Jasper. But
for now, I am content to let
my banged-up heart go to the nurse
in Cedar Rapids: married, kids,
works oncology with a diseased heart
that has never let her imagine a day
beyond thirty, my breaks, my losses,
what I’ve adored and what I’ve feared,
ﬂying off separately to wherever
these things ﬂy.
Johnny Cash at the Gates of Heaven

I imagine you standing there hangdog cool,
stoic, waiting –
you’ve waited this long –
for Jesus, Peter, the Father himself.

It’s nice to think of you
not belonging here,
too much peace, heaven too white.
Who’s Johnny Cash without your sins,
your dark desires to battle? Our idols,
we want them starving
don’t we
for love, for god,
unsaved and sinning gloriously
or
more to the truth, fighting not to,
striving at becoming, talking

the rest of us down. God
I wish you could it sing it now,
Johnny, now you’re on that train,
*boom-chicka-boom* once more,
be the porter and tell us
what it all comes to.

Now that you’re gone like the guitar
hero in “Tennessee Flat-Top Box”
I wonder who’s tending the grapes in Bon Aqua,
who’s roaming Cinnamon Hill in Jamaica.

I wish you could sing it, Johnny,
what is, what isn’t,
but since you can’t, let’s picture it this way:
a gathering of angels,
white and beautiful, sure,
but wearing dark glasses circling
just above trumpeting the Mexican horns
from “Ring of Fire,” your own personal
Jesus reaching out to take your
cotton-scarred hand, behind him,
still, June smiling
hotter than a pepper sprout.
Drive

Tonight, after we discover the unexpected shadow, the fact that we are not what we believed, hoped, I go out to the car, follow a road that edged north, then east, until the town disappears in the mirrors my headlamps the only light in the coming black, the planet’s dark side. But still I can see the unlit houses, the front of farms maybe,

all but abandoned, left and right, every other turn of the odometer. I get those yellow signs promising leaping deer before long, but see none. In the glove is the map I’ve long since driven off of. I wouldn’t use it anyway; I’ve lost myself on purpose in the curve of empty road to see what there is to see, to take measure.

Last night after we hung up I listened to the ceiling, the building, muffled rage of the carpenter upstairs, and his wife. I heard a table overturn, something break, then, her quick feet on the stairs, her paused shadow creasing the thin band of light just outside my door, and then her vague frame retreating down the street in the square of my window.

Now, I’m unable to form a picture of you in Chicago. I try to unimagine it altogether, unconceive the children we’ve already wrestled names for. What now, now that we’ve admitted this distance? We fear darkness it seems because it spreads. The romanticized moon, a single parenthesis in the sky, is only a lifeless rock lit at night by the incidental sun reflected around the earth only to be extinguished by the same light in the morning as it fades like smoke into blue. There are those who make their way with stars; Tonight I make mine without: without street signs or maps, without design, or outside help from the one open station past Comstock. I make home by accident, without knowing the name or the direction of the road.
The Garter Snake Club

They never stopped. Arcing without effort, without exhaustion through the trellis of fingers, scenting the air with their blades of tongue. Safaried from the abandoned baseball park – the wild redeeming itself at the edge of Homan Avenue.

My friends each lifted faceward a twisting licorice menace with names like Kong and Blade. That afternoon, they lowered the big door, gave me the big shut into the wide immensity, outside. To me the Barskus garage became a palace, treasured with that singular menagerie, my friends the guardians, the keepers of that sacred trust, and I, I was just me, walking the measured sidewalk waiting for them to emerge, to become just kids again.

I would have done anything to belong – yet hadn’t. The rule was simple: on my own catch a snake and that gray door would lift open but dark thoughts slithered down the pure paved streets of my mind, sinking me deep into narrow crawlspaces. But what could I do? One oppressive Saturday I hit the fields armed with one deep bucket and a long, long stick. And full-length pants, tucked into my socks. I waded through the tall, pale yellow grass, the Great Prairie resurfacing mid-city, one square acre haunted still with the wallop and kick of baseball all played out years before I was born. Street gangs, Vicelords and Cobras roamed there now, cryptically, building makeshift forts, frontiersman with boards carried from who knows where. They built fires, smoked drugs, and once tied a kid to an old fence pole, tortured him with lit cigarettes and knives. Then the forts would blow back into boards with the rain and wind, and scatter in high grass, peeling violently ( paint shards...
sharp as scales), killing the grass and harboring snakes. 
I lifted the first with my foot, but couldn’t raise it high enough to see – the darkness was deep and vast, seemed to push back the line of light. Nothing. 
I stepped around the grass teepees the moles made

and circled from the creek to the ruins 
of the dugouts, thinking *fang* and *venom.* 
About third base, hidden beneath an old striker’s sign 
I found one, half my arm’s length, 
like a King Cobra it reeled up toward

me and wheeled back again, a single *S* making itself over and over in stunned defiance. Splinters bore into the palm of my hand. I flipped the board and shielded myself with the stick. 
In one hand I held the bucket-cage,

and with the other I scooped him in, as easy as a lifeless leaf from a tree. 
Here memory breaks down, but I must have filled the bucket with long teepee grass, covered the top against escape. I don’t remember

my friends, or what must have been a triumphant walk down that long black driveway. I made the club, I know, because I can see us in that garage raising from the tanks these strange, limbless creatures, as if we were the first, turning them over in the shafts of sunlight and the dank shadows. And I still have that day our parents made us let them go, standing at the edge of the fields, watching them glide through the wild grass easy as wind. I imagine that that first day alone I raced back across what was

once the right field foul line, across Homan, and down the block to where I imagine the others sat listlessly on the curb, half-heartedly casting stones at a neighbor’s chrome hubcaps, the metal dings vibrating across the gas-rainbowed puddles.
I Must Have Heard the Shot

How do you suppose they find it, the tragedy?
Like flying blood hounds, winged cameras fitted
with special pain-seeking lenses blaze through the trees.
What a thrill to have all these helicopters
anchored above our little neighborhood, the far edge
of the city. I think that one is Channel Two.
You know they only come when something big
happens. So this must be.

But for once TV is less than what we know:
the words have danced down all the way
from 111th street. TV talks
but we know better. We know “relative”
is son; “South Side family” is Schroeder’s (I
went to grammar school with the uncle),
“unconfirmed speculation” is “husband,”
“dead,” “son,” and “murder”. Oh, look,
Theresa has the killer over the fence.
High school year book. ‘See, he’s the one.
Top row. Sweet kid. Basketball player.’

The pre-schoolers extend their range,
Getting out from under the mid-block
Trees: “Channel Seven! It’s Channel Seven!”

All this fuss as husband imperceptibly
becomes “the body,” and past tense neatly
sucks up what’s left. The mother – nobody
has seen her, have they? She’s the one
for the cameras: wife of the killed, mother
of the killer. Beyond prototype she is really there,
just moments away from where I’m standing,
in a room some place, pushing her brown hair
from her eyes, that dart owl-like from one
sight, one sound to the next – the constant crackle
of emergency chatter, the strange people
moving through her home. She’s suspended
now, isn’t she, between her two lives,
under the choppers like giant mosquitoes.

Now the adults are on their bikes,
Going where cars can’t take them.
We want to see those flashing lights—
how many? — that plastic yellow tape,
which reporters, how they look in real life,
a shot of the body — I mean,
how often is this going to happen to us?
Just one shot at the body,
before the white sheet, as it was
where he fell.
Poem for a Missing Girl

Carlie Brucia, abducted February 1st, 2004

We see a lot of you,
girls like you, taken
before our eyes,
news cameras try to tell
the story, (sell us angst)
your mom’s tears
look the same; dead (usually)
ten year old girl’s smiling
images look the same.
They never show the blood,
or share the wounds, just
the usual moving
pictures of your birth-
day, of you struggling to stay
atop a pyramid of girls.

But the video we see now,
your last, I’ve seen
all week: you walking, early
Sarasota morning in rough
grains, shadows of gray –
 pixels like atoms too few to
bring you quite to video-life.
You’re cutting behind
the car wash on your way home
when the mechanic (his muddy,
granular face NASA
seeks now to resolve)
stops you with a word.
Another and he convinces
you of something, takes
your arm. Again and again,
every quarter hour
he stops, convinces, takes.
Stops, convinces, takes.
Every quarter hour
you’re dragged off
screen right into his car,
his darkness. Had you cried
out, the day bright and busy,
anyone would have
heard you.

T.V. works hard
to flesh your name, to deepen
the tragedy, extend
the range of our caring.
The whole country, they say,
Carlie, is watching
to see if it will be you
or “the body of . . .”

The network’s missing-
girl expert quotes
the statistics that tell
us you’re already dead
as the pretty anchor
purrs on about hope.
So what the hell use is it,
Carlie, this knowing
you? Your innocence?
Your potential? What
does it mean for us
to care about Carlie Brucia
or the young girls who live
in her neighborhood, next to
be taken, raped, killed
by that which proves
to our daughters
the realness of monsters?
I will, anyway,
for you to live still,
for you to walk back
out of nightmare,
but instead his is the dream
that comes true as breaking
news informs how in back of Saint
something or other
he has given back
your small menaced form.
Trauma

Again the trauma helicopters tonight clatter the frame of your bed. Awake you lie, one palm measuring your wife's curved balance, what you can of her breathing, and each wave thundering everything around you: the trees outside, the books in the case, medicine in the medicine cabinet, the little pastel statues on her dresser, your own unsettled bodies. Out there someone hit someone. Somebody crossed some line, drawn, undrawn, and from there it usually looks the same: the constellations of shattered glass, rinsed over and over in the circling red, the blood that doesn't look like blood, the unnatural contortion of the body. Don't worry. They won't stop here. Your house keeps its bleeding quiet.

The saving gets louder, but she stays in sleep. Every night, now, she voices the silence, speaks, not words exactly, but some kind of signifiers you had thought were meant to unlock, to bridge. She murmurs through the noise. She'll smile like we make the dead smile, lying in satin, at the joy we like to think they know. You've given up working her night talk for answers. Instead, each night you wait for the blades: steel, breath, motion. Up there, rationing breath, (as if the weight of the next might crash everything down) some person trying not to die, holding for St. Elizabeth’s.

What happens to those who fail, die sky-suspended under that military whir? Do their spirits, already risen, leave the body, get shot through with invisible words, the frantic radio signaling back and forth from the ground, and get sucked into that steel slash circle? You should learn to adjust to nature, take from living what there is to take, but you won't. In this compromised dark, instead, you hold, wait the approach of these secular angels. From the distance they keep coming, half dozen a day, descending on us and dying behind these quiet houses, the maples and the elms.

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II
The Weightlifter

The weightlifter eyes his body in the mirror.
This is how perfection begins, breathing iron
into rhythm. Image, this way, becomes clearer.
The weightlifter eyes his body in the mirror;
the weight becomes a scalpel to cut out error,
to give formlessness form, a kind of revision.
The weightlifter eyes his body in the mirror.
This is how perfection begins, breathing iron.

At night he lies shaping images of the next life,
his body under the stones of St. Catherine's, decaying.
In his hands he still feels the cold weight like a knife.
At night he lies shaping images of the next life;
in the near-dark he measures his soul, his head rife
with questions of size, shape, strength. A kind of praying,
at night, he lies shaping images of the next life,
his body, under the stones of St. Catherine's, decaying.
Near Still Life, My Father With Telescope

Tonight after work you had slept through dinner
So you could dress now in the dark, measure
The creaks against your wife's waking, and out, into

The moon-glossed dark, climb to the roof, catching
A satellite like god's eye sailing past.
You see everything up here. You fill your eyes

With the moon's blue light, light borrowed from the sun.
It looms, in the new eyepiece, large as this house
You built thirty years ago, evenings and Sundays.

You uncover the telescope – blue fiber glass
Cylinder, tripod screwed to the wood carriage
You made for ease of movement –

Sweet-talk Venus sitting low tonight
In the northern sky. With thumb and finger
You key her numbers and ease her into focus,

A moment, and she spins darkly away, stealing
Across the surface of your carpenter's eye:
Her image, striking beauty, having traveled

A hundred thousand years to reach you here tonight;
And you, standing on the flat roof of your house
In Chicago, brown parka, your once night-black

Hair whitening under your Irish lid,
You, after all has been said and all has been done,
In this ghost light, lift toward everything.
The Road Between Cemeteries, Memorial Day

We are passing the cars that jam
the entrance, line the street, waiting
to get in. The sun, broken and filtered
by the wind-filled oaks, strikes
hard the puffed flags, grass and stones.
‘If I die first,’ she says, ‘promise not
to put me in there,’ her eyes playing
over marbled stones, dressed today
with flags and flowers. ‘I can’t take
the thought of being stuck there forever,’
the wind easing its way into her t-shirt.
She’d rather kill the visual reminder,
take that quick road to dust, and what?
have me spill her like dirt into the wind
over mountain, field or lake? I’m sure I’ll want
her here, one in this field,
her name chiseled into the white face
of a big stone, pretty and permanent.

I say, ‘You won’t know, honey, once
you have passed.’ We look out at the living
coming to comfort the dead,

from our separate windows, the wind
tunneling through, filling her hair,
and the light dancing.
Death Tolls

We hear them every day counted off
on TV, on the radio in our cars;
we hear the sound of the words like a bell,
the familiar summons.
Hurricanes, terrorist attacks, crashes
of planes and trains, epidemics, mass
shootings. The victims get counted,
always the dead first – the wounded next,
catalogued: critical, serious, admitted and released.
And sometimes we have the missing.
For those they send dogs into the toppled
wrecks of buildings to sniff out the absence
But it is the tolls of death we listen for.
They are the ones that grow by the top
of the hour; what was four dead late morning,
by three o’clock grows to eleven.
Announcements climb the ladder: Four, seven,
Seventeen . . . With the death toll, we’re assured,
sure to rise. We say, sad, terrible.
Plane crashes are easiest; you need
only look at the number at the bottom
of the passenger list, the floating and sinking
debris field collected from ocean surface
to ocean floor. 133 on board, 133 dead.
Great or small numbers are best – four or five
we can take, or ten to fifteen thousand –
too small/too big to shake us
from the regular, what we do on Monday,
Tuesday, etcetera. A 28 or a 56,
or even a few hundred, thousand,
will more likely do the trick, carry
to us something of the horror.
And hopefully there’s footage. Revealing
video with shattered houses, open chests,
blood, limbs and few toddlers among the broken
glass, the exploded cars. Or give us celebrities.
Then we don’t need the count, “movie star and
four others”, “princess and entourage” –
names that count more. We count
along through the day, updating each other
before meetings, in fast food drive-thrus,
on the bus and in our backyards. We count
the mourners, the potential mourners who count time,
lined up outside war zone high schools or
airport lobbies. We count the coverage,
the cameras, the interruptions to our regular
scheduled programming to measure the allure.
This week we’re counting in Qana, Lebanon.
The human rights worker with his clip board,
the bloodied neighbors among the guerillas,
count with the bomber’s investigating committee,
the numbers of senseless dead, the numbers
of children blasted home to Allah or Jesus.
Days later, while we still count the bodies,
there’s talk of toll inflation of sighting
of refrigerated trucks surreptitiously planting
innocent corpses among these dead to up the outrage.
Here, in this small town out of range of hurricanes,
short, medium range missiles, quakes and mudslides,
we’ll parse out factors and debate early
warning systems, metal detectors and war policy
until the final count is handed down, the number
inked readabley on the front page.
Never Die Easy
-on the death of Walter Payton, November 1st, 1999

All day the elegies come in slow-motion.
For days after your death you move down
field, against Green Bay, Tampa, everyone,
taking aim at the line, you leap into sky—
again and again the editor gives you back
to us, as if proving the failure of natural
laws, as if to show you could never fall. How
could I sit still those Sundays after seeing you
burst that line, full-blossomed, juiking across our
small square of television; my eyes held
my breath in my shoulders; what I had I threw
into each hit you took — you surviving,
force of linebacker, backs breaking against
your body from left from right from underneath,
and still the engine, your legs, driving, Soldier’s
grass flying, until the breath of open field,
and, now you the showman, high-steppin’ the side­
lines. A city’s thirteen-year glory —
your bruised grace. I had need of this.
I wore the jersey; in every pick-up game
I was you; I juked and faked, practicing
that one signature over and over believing
that it could give me something, a strength
I could grow up through. Never die easy,
you said, without words, the simple, trivial
grace of a football player. You did not.
It does not seem possible that you could be so dead,
stilled, sunk below the earth you had mastered.

Of course you had to be taken down
from the inside, from the unseen, from what
could not be shaken. And tonight on the Drive,
as I round the stadium, I see Chicago’s
love spelled in ten story lights, 34, --
and this unexpected grief, the surprise
that pulls me to the side.
Half Way Through Mariani’s Berryman, I Write an Ill-Advised Poem to the Poet

You’ve just finished making love to and murdering Anne Bradstreet, just before the dissolution of marriage one. I re-read the poem, my earnest marginalia and try seeing you sowing, weeping word & word into place, marching down each stanza to Eileen, recovering from infertility surgery. You, I’ve seen, walking in literary graveyards for first insight. Crane, Shakespeare. The biographer has hinted away suicide, put father’s gun in mother’s hand. As I sweep through your life in my well-ordered subdivision I want to quiet the biographer and talk directly to you. I confess my questions are prurient, fan-like: in the end, without powder burns, did you believe your mother killed your father? Why will it be a bridge? I’ve got more . . . –your life laid low, laid out in these 500 pages you had requested not to be written I get the whole of your life crushed, digestible in a rainy weekend – you stumble-running, drunkenly through wives and books and friends and students and lovers and poems, broken and daring as your syntax. Clinical, no doubt, your depression, but in your years they did not talk of broken synaptic communication, locate the flaw in biology, not character. We might thank God Shea failed and sent you Freud-like into your dreams until all the world became a dream (a nightmare) Henry sang. And just what would have become of Henry had John had Prozac, not had pitcher after martini pitcher?

What would you say of death now, or more to the point, of committing your own murder? Sitting at my desk, your life under one pool of light from my reading lamp . . . I’ll tell you I’ve wanted suicide, felt the dark against my back, and for me too poems have stayed the push. Again, again. Reading him, Henry, in this kind of dark, seems to conjure you, John and I wish you could tell me from the ether a last poem. Stun with a well-sung song as you did those in Carbondale, Cambridge, New York. There’s no way to reach you. I can’t, in the stiller moments, wonder you up, eating eggs with Twiss or talking Saint Mark’s with a student in Minnesota’s hallways. But there is Henry, safe high on my bookshelf, singing and speaking & speaking & speaking, as you have instructed.
Your Card

for Dr. Joseph McCarthy

Still after ten years I carry it
hardly worn, the edges still sharp, numbers:
address, phone – work on the front, type-set,

home in your hand inked blue on back – are dark
and legible. Each letter of your two names
remains unfaded, imprinted in black, (as

the day you gave it), on the thick beige paper.
Then the three extra letters, your license to save
lives – suicide specialist – catcher

in the rye; I’d like to know, tell me how
many were saved, how many succeeded
over the cliff? Here at the wake you are

silent, arms folded artificially,
glasses gone, lips sewn shut, eyes dark,
sewn shut and for once I say nothing,

ask nothing, and instead sit strangely before
the kneelers at the casket, fingering your new
card – your carpenter-shepherd, pastelled, holding

the smallest of the flock, your names, numbers
like parentheses have been listed on back,
your bottom line, I guess. This is the faith

you tried to reason me back into. Christ
has died. Christ is risen . . . There is nothing
for me to do here. A week after they return

you to the earth I ask the bartender
for a phone and dial again those numbers
on your card, to hear the absence, to know

its tenor, its pitch. Not even the machine
holds your voice any longer. The numbers
mechanically re-assigned. Letters that make
your name broken down, boxed, removed.
Your small office emptied, re-painted, re-rented your things have been scattered and sold –

chairs, books, patient files (notes on the lost and near-lost) the painting of the white sailboat that sailed rough, uncalmed Cape Cod

waters that hung above your right shoulder, the mahogany table where we sat, exchanged what for ten years had to be exchanged.

Whether you glide out there in the ether, perhaps in the elastic company of suicide angels, the pastelled shepherd

or just here, on earth, with us, unreachable, I will carry both your cards, Dr. Joe – your letters, your numbers – small, hidden, losable monuments.
Mary and Jesus, a Fragment

For a moment, take him off the cross. Let him be hers once more, Jesus, not the Christ. Take him down,

back from the Pharisees; take him off Calvary, out of Jerusalem and down the road into Nazareth.

Erase the missing years, the years nobody writes, the days hoisting beams, cutting planks, waiting

for the crowds, the show, the pain, blood like wine. Unage him; bring him down to your knees so we can watch her,

alone, pause her work a moment, stretch against the stark stone front of the house, shade her dark eyes

and watch him first raise himself up from his knees, teetering in the arid wind like a reed. When he’d fall she must have

brushed the hair from his eyes, lifted him, time and again from the sand, taught him how to reach forward his soles, balance,

move his body. Could she then see those small hands pierced, feel in his head the thomed gashes

when she traced her fingers through his hair? Is he holding them now, as he steadies heel versus toe, all man’s sin

that will hang from his dying eyes? Nobody’s instrument now; he is still hers, and she is yet unbeseeched, icon

in blue, template for woman. You
can see it, can’t you, in her eyes: her boy stepping the ground toward her?
Eating Lunch With My Father

I’ve killed him so many times
to see how it feels, to see what

the world looks like without
one of its masters, but it’s hard

to see him take himself out
as he’s doing today. My father

has long since subtracted the anguish
that made me find countless ways
to take cover from his eyes, finding
reasons, when he was there, not to go home.

Now we eat steak sandwiches,
drink straight cokes here in this bar –

baseball, Olympic soccer
on giant five-foot screens.

The third baseman, looking like he’s
standing on the bar, helps ease
the distance, like sports so often
has to between fathers and sons.

This is an update. Friends, family
hurt, crippled, dying –

he gives their prognoses, precise
detail: disease phase, how each reacts.

A co-worker, firefighter, is dead.
Car accident, 59. My mother must take

her cousin to each chemo treatment
(I picture the cancer like fish swirling
around his besieged bones) because
he can’t fight the loneliness too.
My father's childhood friend, blind now two years from diabetes,

has had his second foot amputated; he sits now in his wheel chair listening
to AM radio, the ghost of his absent limbs tap out the bump music beat.

This is serious discourse from which the third baseman, Mia Hamm, can do

nothing to save me. His tear-strained eyes don't avoid mine, embarrass me.

The windows show the sentiment: the line is moving and I'm at the gate.

Suddenly I see him stilled in the coffin, his hair done wrong, his blue suit,

that fake expression they paint to make him look like he could wake up, speak to us. I

breathe out, reach to grasp the handles on the handleless chair . . .

have nothing for him and look away, say, "Wow, that's sad,"

and call the waitress for the check.
Cherish, We’re Told

Cherish, we’re told,
    each moment; the dead
    who can yet advise

Implore us to enjoy
    every sandwich,
    but they, from their death

Beds can no longer
    know it’s not possible.
    You’re a fool to try.

Let’s admit now nearly
    every moment is
    wasted, goes by

Uncherished, uncelebrated,
    not even remembered.
    That touch of light

On your lover’s cheek,
    that would have made you
    stay, you lost making coffee;

Kid days playing matchbox cars
    on the black hearth
    now too distant like stars

To provide any real heat or light.
    And those last few visits
    with your grandfather

When he told you about the war, confessed
    his terror of dying, clutching
    your finger the way babies do

 Forced out of mind in favor
    of figures, work and more work,
    the jack-hammer culture.

Even now, as your dog discovers

45
the unborn baby within your wife
    you’re upstairs, at the computer

Sorting, frantically, editing,
copying pictures, the already captured
    so that they be remembered better.

“IT’s your life, be there,”
    \textit{live each day to the fullest,}
    \textit{cherish every moment} –

As if all of our moments were clear,
distinguishable, big from small,
    packageable, storable,

Immovable like a mountain in our backyard,
    that we could visit, study
    each morning, each night.

Instead we’re there with our camcorders
    producing hours and hours of near
    professional memories,

Hoping, by God, we have the camera
    when come the life-changing moments
    and we have enough battery.
Thanksgiving with Rose

Her husband has become her father; this is how

the romance dies, as he tells her again, “No,

mother is in heaven; she’s not coming home.”

Through the wasted decades they’ve reached back to give her

a doll to occupy her broken mind, her open hands;

it’s safer than her touching the grandchildren, the little

strangers who rush past, pause, consider her like a museum

exhibit. She strokes the doll’s unpinchable cheeks,

her captive affection lingers over the plastic

hair. Dinner is being prepared, timed for half-time

and talk is talked and talked, hordes of words swirl like smoke

smothering meaning, until one hits, strikes a chord

and Rose is again as Rose has been,

then the rooms and faces, the voices, all these tip-
of-the-tongue traces
of meaning form again

a name she can name, Rose,
what’s lost and what’s being

lost and hurry to her mouth
comes something like words

and everyone nods and says,
“Yes, Rose, yes.”
III
Skin

It is the largest organ,
    these thin elastic layers
that mask muscle and bone, larger
than the poisoned liver, drawing more air
than the lungs, covering more territory than even the heart --
nothing but what holds us together.

Yours is how I come to know you,
    everything,
all second hand, transcribed by your skin;
save for what remains hidden:
    how the simple grace
of your small fingers on my body, my face,
how they settle me, like faith.

The second night, we slipped off our clothes
and revealed our maps,
    the written record
of where we’ve been: the knuckled scar
above my left eye, the curved spread
of light brown islands impressed at birth
across your uncurved hip.

When we came back from Hawaii,
dry white fissures appeared
    across our skin
like the cracked earth of the Big Island,
Earth’s youngest, still stretching,
gestating in the Pacific underneath
    a curtain of steam.
All week we peeled back the damage,
the largest part of ourselves deciduous,
coming off in thin translucent shapes.

Do you remember as kids
    trying to pull it back,
shuffle it snake-like, the strange pleasured-pinch,
tearing off in widening ribbons,
as if you could make something out of it,
another self, perhaps, hollow . . .
    the pink of dawn underneath.
They talk now of an endless communion,  
defecting atoms flying between us:  
         I becoming you,  
you becoming me, ever-permutating.  
But we know better:  
         the law of flying apart,  
that to touch one must reach.

And again tonight  
we'll undress and lie skin to skin  
in original darkness  
writing names across the wide page  
of the back, painting invisible pictures  
and peeling time back hour by hour,  
year into year until we lose these bodies,  
one and then the other.  
Then, outside your skin, tell me  
how will I know you?
Another Day and No Flying

saucer graces the lens
of my camcorder.
Cumulus clouds
like ocean-liners
drift empty across
the fixed sky.
Wonder stays sleeping
and it might as well
rain as it always has.
Clear skies yield nothing
but infinitesimal
hints, dots of light
that never speak.
Why is it only isolated
farmers and the whacked
who get the call? Preter-
natural lights filling
red dust of New Mexican
desert, I’ve seen
the footage: gray bubbled
saucer, zigging at unearthly
speeds to escape, perhaps
the rancher’s Sony handheld.

Isn’t it strange how we’ve always
seen our salvation
coming from the sky?
That’s where we point
our scopes, send probes
and prayers. Where does
it come from, this need
to be dominated – force greater
than ourselves, gods
of all creeds, old
testament, new,
pagan (sacrificial smoke
rising in the wind),
far advanced alien
civilizations? But
nothing ever comes. Prayer
and probe alike drift harm-
lessly into the darkness,
our instruments record
the emptiness, rock,
and dust; spectral shades of light
suggest, obscure knowledge.
I wonder if we could
get just a wink,
from some entity out there,
supposed to be more
than what we are,
a cosmic blown kiss—
would we believe it?
Late October Dusk

On days like this when the season’s first cold seems to fall out of the perfect wide blue sky,
dusk brings the world into strange focus,
you can see the thin edges to the world.

A film dissolves, evaporates, the day disrobes. And the feeling that comes with, like we are
not supposed to look, -- an obscenity --
like watching your neighbors make love
through an uncovered window, or talking up strangers in crowded trains, elevators.

We are unguarded somehow, assailable while that brief window yawns open, closed
we walk looking down, we look away. This is the time I leave, every Thursday, dusk.

Twenty dollars in gas and fast food get me those one-hundred and forty-eight miles
to where you are, now leaving your job, threading lightly through the herd of people,
the painted cows, under Chicago’s dark steel. I no longer can see the sun; it set down
somewhere in Indiana at the foot of Lake Michigan; the fields just miles ahead seem ravished
by fire, the orange of flame, the reds taint the sky brilliantly, like a half-painted masterwork,
the darkening blue on all sides, both windows, the rear view mirror, encroaching. I push
the gas into lawlessness, until the steering wheel shakes, thinking I can catch it, the light
that certainly spreads to where you are,
now in your apartment, carefully lighting
candles in every room like votives. I see
you combing your hair patiently in the mirror,
changing your clothes for the bar where we’ll meet.
You had given up on children, a man who could
be husband. I drive my car hard, watching you,
by now standing in the light of the jukebox,
familiar in the way the dream always has been.
Semi-trucks fly up carelessly in the construction
lanes. It is dark now, deep blue has turned black.
You are here. And now I drive and walk and see
with extraordinary clarity.
Expectant

We are beginner gods
past pleasure, wanting
creation in our own image.
But before desire a child begins
with books, instruments;
you’ve charted our failure –
graphs, spreadsheets record
each month, year, a code only
you know. The dead signified
in symbols I can’t understand.

Scientists, we are accountants,
counting blood, needles, chances.

From the world you call
me to our room; with clocks

in your eyes, you drop your skirt,
arrange yourself across the gray

comforter with purple flowers.
Your practical fingers gauge

your readiness. Yet again, deftly
we’ll compose our bodies, careful

of breath, as if calm could help
us hear existence explode

into existence and we would
know. We again labor – what else

can we do, but press our wills
to shape the abstraction

we’ve already named.
I undress. Breathe in
what's left of the breath
of god. *Come on*, you say,
tapping the bed.
The Voice of a Thousand Geese

We’re walking the snowed over path around Lake Katherine, a small oasis of wilderness spared by the skulking suburbs of Chicago, the forced elegance of pale blue townhouses lean in on every side. Half the small lake is frozen, the thick ice skating rink white, the other half, for some reason, remains fluid, dark, too dark to see the few fish that have not buried themselves in the lake’s muddy bottom—a small, seasonal death to preserve life—while groups of ducks trace sloppy circles on the surface. We’ve brought the puppy, and now she edges a tentative paw onto the ice; the clash of instincts. She probes the air with her nose weighing known against unknown, the danger against that inscrutable need to let go and just run and run. We’ve got our winter uniforms on, long black coats, scarves and gloves for our hands. We talk about the child we want, letting our emotions for the dog drift to shape the abstraction. We have names for him or her, alive perhaps already deep within your body.

Divorce, neither of us has spoken the word for weeks now, haven’t spoken of ending what we said we’d never end. “This is nice,” you say, the words a faint cloud that dissipates just before reaching me. This place, for some reason, seems to hold an importance, something to be understood. We pass a sign that says something about the Indians that once lived here, another about Roosevelt’s conservation corps that built this place. And then we get the sound, foreign and building, before the vision: hundreds of dark geese breaking from the tall stick bouquet trees beyond the Cal-Sag railroad bridge. They rise and swell the sky, a time-lapsed rain storm gathering at the prairie horizon. They come in low, right for us, their querulous honking like the seesaws I never ventured to ride in Mt. Greenwood park, so musicless and deafening it seems they must be in pain. Why do they cry like that, I wonder as they swarm just over our heads, and loop miles to the east. They become specks, black dust on the harsh gray clouds. I try not to think of Yeats and his swans, or the young men who have replaced him on the shore. Instead I listen to you tell me about the Blackfoot Indian fable you read in a novel: the story of Feather Woman losing heaven and her husband, Morning Star, and how each dawn, in unremitting grief, she wailed and the sound of her wailing was said to be like the voice of a thousand geese. In my loss imagination of these months there has been no sound. Nothing but the images of the many walls life would begin to build between us. And, as you finish as if on cue, these thousand circle back like sorrow, descending, they skid the water to a stop, graceless and graceful. And their voices, each at a time, slow to silence, until I can hear nothing but the feet of the dog patterning the snow and the sound of our breathing, quiet and careful. And I want to run. Out onto the ice, to the edge where half the lake struggles to stay conscious of itself, conscious of the other half. I want to close on the geese, make them shatter again the air with that song, so I could get it, take it down on paper, translate it into words: signs we might read.... But instead I raise the camera and take their picture. Turn to you, and take yours. You take the camera and take one of the dog, the split lake and the trees in their shame. We take
dozens of pictures as if we were trying to prove something about our having been here. We walk on and at some point you tell me about those fish asleep in the lake bottom’s thick mud, and the ones who think they know better, but become food for the ducks near the stream or for these hundreds of durable geese, that must have found some reason to stay.
When Frankie, My Seven-Year-Old Neighbor, Asks Me to Race

Frankie is eager to see if he can beat "someone big," like me. A big day grown small comes back – the day a tie could not be broken between Tim Newman, the fastest boy, and me. He was older, cool as the lead singer from Cheap Trick, with red gym shoes God must have made just for him. I was nine, shocked by the audacity of my legs. Again and again we lined up against each other under the thick shade of the ten story pine tree I had watched him, the others, climb, arching my neck as they scrambled to where they said they could see the Sears Tower, their bodies waving like flags in the wind. Down the cracked blacktop we shot, to the front yard and the light of the white-squared sidewalk. And once and again I remained, if unvictorious, unbeaten. Short as my legs were, my feet took big gaping bites of the earth, my hands I kept straight, karate chop style, to carve the wind from my body. How long I held that moment – I was short, un-tough, afraid of snakes and porn novels and soon, drinking warm Budweiser in the alley and kissing, god, kissing Patty Wagner who I’d loved since I could remember. But I could run. And back then, speed counted. Older boys took note – “that boy can fly!”; my nine-year-old resume had something that would recommend me. And it did. Fast, for years, made me friends, brought respect, got me picked for baseball, football, despite having trouble catching either.

Now, I’m again at the line, thirty years later against Frankie, the neighbor boy, who is anxious to measure himself against the grown world. He’s got his black gym shoes with red dragons, double-tied. His eyes size me up, smiling ambition, as he lists the names of the boys he’s already beaten today. And what else can you do when you’re a boy and the big world rakes its hard cold eyes over what little you have become so far, except stand and measure yourself against some small part of it, to at least start to know what exactly you have and don’t have?
Player Piano

This was where, because I’d foresworn clarinet and quit the sixth grade football team, I was to be several hours each day, fingers arched, back straight, with this strange lined language—black symbols: treble clef, bass clef, flats and sharps on the stave to digest, decode into meaningful sound. I was to become a piano player. Even though the tobacco-yellowed ivory, the aged keyboard was tired, so tired some keys stiffened to the touch, a rigor mortis decades old. Others when called upon let out weak mournful sighs as if lodging complaint for having nothing to say. My mother, wanting to ‘antique’ the antique, had me paint over the bright green—a dingy, gray-bronze. The lacquer has hung in the short air since. The ghost player who with invisible grace had brought the keys to life (I saw this once in my great aunt’s living room, as if the piano were alive) had long abandoned the broken down instrument and none of the three repairmen could bring him back. I often wondered, as I struggled to shape my fingers into music, what he might have played in that dark basement, my tentative tracing of his airy prints.

“Do you hear it?” Mrs. Hepburn would ask, and when I shook my head she’d lean across me, her trembling hands stilled and she called the song into the room, as if it had always been there. Her eyes implored me to understand. I had it: talent, if only I’d try. Talent. Like a hammer the word struck each time my mother forced me down to make something happen. But I never failed to disappoint as the songs—“Battle Hymn of the Republic,” “Heartbreak
Hotel," wafted like smoke before my grasp. Talent even got me an electric keyboard one Christmas, as if rock and roll could take me where carols and sonatas had not. I sent it back because its giving had finally shone light on a knowledge slowly creeping: I'd never be good. Whatever I had I didn't have (the shame of it was and is) ambition — the strain of becoming something more. So the player piano gathered old clothes, forgotten statues and dusty projects. My talent to waste, but now, twenty-five years later, in my father's garage, after we heft the old box onto the wheeled cart for the neighbor kid's basement, I listen to this boy conjure Beethoven, Gershwin, from those long-blamed keys, filling the alley. This is how talent recriminates, how undeveloped potential lodges in the mind. How far I am now from the simple safety of middle C, the dull shadows awash in my mother's eyes when again and again she would send me down to play one more hour, while she crafted meals in the kitchen's fading light. I can still see her, the tilt of her head, straining to listen, to hear something ascend from the basement.
Ultrasound

This is how we meet,
nearly, you and I,

in this grainy storm.
Sound echoes unheard

through your mother’s
abdomen sparking

the colorless kaleidoscope:
muted whites, flashing blacks

swirl and zoom like T.V.
storm radar.

At first it’s hard to tell
the difference between you,

the machine, but soon we
see how from dream and science

you’ve come, somehow, to be.
The tech, with her meticulous
cursor crossing and counting,
proves it. You form and reform,
as if purposely teasing
our need to see you. Again

and again your image resolves
briefly into a readable human

then winks itself away. You
are translucent and nearly

all that makes you,
legible as letters.

There’s your kidney,
bright wand of femur,
spine curving,  
like a string of stars.

I’ll never see  
this much of you again,

pulse of cerebellum,  
the dark network

recording this first meeting;  
your heart – how it hammers

as if alone it could knock  
down the closed door to the world –

I see so much, but not  
you. But even this

is one up on you;  
since, after all, you see nothing

of me. Just sense  
of light, new menu of sound,

the jog and jostle – all as alien  
as what’s to come (or is it?):

mystery more than you or I  
can know, and with a click

and a switch, back into black,  
for now, you go.
Ode to People Who Wave

You folks who wave have all kinds of waves, the north-south wrist flip, quick and flapping; the sing-song, five finger spread, side to side wave straight out of a simpler time; or the non-waving wave, the uncomplicated raised hand held still, as if stopping time. There is the head flip wave, big with men and boys hell-bent on becoming men, the tip of the hat, the faux military salute, the thumbs up, the double thumbs up, the “you’re the man” point-wave. I especially like the small child puppet wave, how you pinch all five fingers together several times – as if honking a nose, speaking your “hello” from the back car window or across the department store. All of which tell the wavee the same important message: I see you, and I am glad to see you.

You are always overshadowed, aren’t you by those who honk, those who “give the finger,” but, thankfully, you are out there. Just today, pulling out of my subdivision, one of you, a man, you stranger wielding a tractor near Division’s edge found me in my van and stopped to lift your hand. Surprised, I shot my hand up, out the window instilling as much gratitude, as much fellow-feeling as I could in the simple facing of my palm to yours, desperate to complete the connection. Why?

What is it about this affable acknowledgement from strangers that stirs in me such emotion? A sadness in the blood comes to attention each time, as if I were some ascetic emerging after years from a cave my first human contact unsolicited, small kindness, to say welcome back, remember yourself, brother, as one of us, the human community. And I, blinking through the bright sun,
can hardly believe my luck.