



All the Rest is Silence

Many, many seasons, many years, in
practice of this small art. But today I bow
my head and take the keyboard under
my fingers as though it were a butterfly,
and the keys spots on the butterfly's
wings

Newer Poems

Gertrude and Otis

Our daughter had two frogs until very recently.
Red walkers. Gertrude and Otis. Small and quiet,
like our daughter, like the time she asked us to sit down
and explained to us that she was no longer our daughter.
That she was our son. And it was okay, we told him,
we simply loved this tiny fourteen-year-old creature
for whomever he was, we who'd made her. And we let
go of Catherine, his dead name, and called him Asher
at first, the name he tried on before he settled on Eli.

Last week Otis died. He was already stiff
when Eli found him. Desiccated and just two years old
but gone early. And our son had done nothing but care
for him (as for Gertrude) with the intricacy of caring
that a solemn, self-cutting fourteen-year-old can muster,
a tenderness of charity extended to others if not himself.
He missed a day of school in grief, would have missed
another if his mother had not insisted.
Life moved on, from the fumes of last week to this.

Tonight we came home and Gertrude was dead.
Still supple, but dead. And we knew from the wail
coming from his bedroom exactly what had happened,
knew it before we made it through Eli's door, because
it was the same shriek we'd heard the week before.

My wife was first up the stairs.
When I made it up our son was already
in her arms, a rag doll, and my wife holding him
the way I held my wife last spring, when our son
tried to hurt himself. When they took him
and kept him for three weeks. My wife was saying
there, there, it isn't your fault. You fed her. You loved
her. You tended her as best you could. But all
our son could say, limp in his mother's arms,
was that it was his fault. Somehow his fault. Gertrude
was lying on top of a rock in her aquarium
where our son had placed her. Our son.
Who just kept saying fault. Over and over. Trembling.
She's gone, mom, he said. She's gone.

Bed

We speak of money. We speak of children.
We speak of restaurants. We speak of movies.
We speak, with wonder, of our good fortune.
We speak of fortune cookies, their chronic absurdities.
But we speak of them. We speak of the eccentricities
of our friends. This the sort of thing that percolates
for hours. We speak of that which we cannot know.
We speak of the smiling young man who comes
three times a week to train us in our makeshift gym.
Beneath our canopy we speak of the ceaseless insults
of the body, the smaller insults of travel.
We speak of the tiny insults of the day.
We speak of the large hypocrisies that issue daily
from the radio, the television, the *Times*.
The times. We speak of the times
of our lives when we were not ourselves. Regret.
But please. Is regret ever worth the effort?
The acid? We speak of diminishment.
We speak each at times of small nobilities
committed by the other. We speak of infidelities
as insects feeding upon the leaves of a rose. The holes
disfigure. The rose endures. And our bodies
stiffen in the cotton, beneath the dark,
so the words then are made not of letters
but silences. We speak as privates of the long history
of generals, of pashas. We speak of private histories.
Galactic histories. We speak of the cosmos, at times.
We speak of time as a river. One direction.
Sometimes we speak of abiding in the bleak
hot freezing northeast, in this nowhere place
out past the sticks, where our neighbors live
in shambling houses and do not share our politics.
We speak of Italy. Sometimes we speak of Italy.

Tull's Overlook

There is a humble and private road
inclines steeply past the homes on our hill.
Little more than a service drive,
something less than a street.
It is our lifeline to the world below.
More turns than the Via Dolorosa. A long climb
by foot, and even our cars strain in ascent.
Three houses at the apex, of altitude sufficient
to claim the climate our own. We're famous
among ourselves. We joke, but it's no joke:
it's hotter here when hot, colder when cold,
and the snows abate at the sovereign pace
of scholars debating canonical text. So, three
homes at the top of this winding drive. Ours
hangs among them. This rural neighborhood
runed in our century's sense of the term
rural – our development of the sort
that displaced that for which it was named.
Not a very useful hill, not much
in the way of farmland, narrow and cross
and stony, but it caught the eye of a developer,
and here he built, and here we eat and shelter
and sleep. It is a still place with a fair growth
of bush and brush. And the sides of the road
hermetic, thick with thorn and stands of trees
running back into themselves. Such a place
serves well as refuge to possum, fox and skunk,
to groundhog, raccoon and squirrel. And deer.
Many deer. We are a danger to them, they
to us: stag, doe, adolescents, the fawns. We drive
the hill slowly, trip down, trip up, for what
are we doing but traipsing through the backyard
of a neighbor we've never met yet often seen?
The deer are drawn to the road. It is a hard river
beyond their understanding. At times they freeze
at the approach of this miraculous animal
that smells and grinds like nothing that belongs
in a wood, this beast that runs on grease and gas
instead of blood. And then, having drunk their fill
in deer time, which is all the time in the world, bolt
back to the others, to ponder yet another coming.

Certainty

It is a late June morning, the air still cool, not yet past seven, and Arya, our silver and blue husky, not yet past midlife, not just yet, but perhaps in the late June of her days, is guarding the door to the back patio from troves of birds and rabbits and squirrels.

There was a time, and not so long ago, she smiles, when I'd have stirred myself at each flap, each scurry, each hop, pursuing my dream of bird and rabbit. And yes, even of squirrel. I recall that *one* certain day, she muses . . . and her ears twitch and her body tenses.

She puts me in mind of a woman, a woman of a certain age. Perhaps approaching August. Here, she is yours – make her whatever age you please. But please, grant her a transport of delight. Memory, not melancholy.

Let her shamble through the neighborhood where she grew up, let her find herself standing at last before a certain door; give her the courage to knock. Let the people of that house look upon her face as she peers past them into the quiet offices of April.

Property

Seven yards of mulch. The kind that smells sweet. The kind that doesn't cost so much. The kind that's just good enough to get the job done, that gladdens the eye as it tumbles from the truck onto the macadam by the backyard gate, the kind that's shoveled onto old wheelbarrows and carted into the gardens on rickety wheels, and the workers look down at their rusty tools and curse the boss, they tell each other *trash*, they use the Spanish word for trash, *basura*, all day long *basura* fills the air climbing from their brown cords of muscle, and they nod to each other, they know the system, they have children to feed, they know how it works, they know their places, they look at the boss and smile, they smile, but wails of *basura*, *basura*, until *basura* no longer merits its lousy italics because it has become the language of this place, it is no longer foreign, it is rooted here, the word as local as the trees and the weeds and the tools are old but the owner wants to squeeze out the last of their blood and rust.

What the snake said

Time to talk some truth,
said the snake,
sliding from grass to tree.

The truest scales of time,
said the snake,
are the sun and rain.

The sun tells the hours.
The rain, the minutes.

The truth is shining
and dripping, always,
through these branches.

Yes, the truth.
No more fearsome
than a voice in a tree,
said the snake.

Take this.
Do you fear
a moment's sweetness?

No more fearsome
than the shadow
that moves upon that hill.

Do you fear the rocks
of the hill? The raindrops
of its pebbles?

What are you afraid of?
I am here now,
said the snake.

And slid down.

Here by your side.
Just two gods in the grass,
said the snake.

Asher

I walked to the end of a hiking trail,
it just ran out like a stream, and there
in the dryness and dissolution
of the scrub and tall grass you were.
It was a surprise, but it wasn't.
I had been down other trails.
I knew you would be there.

When I looked from a telescope
not at the roofs of Paris below
but up into the sky, it was a spangle
of dust, dusty stars, hermetic
each in its own way, each with
a collection of admirers circling,
and then I dropped the glass lower,
down into the cloud of city light,
and there you were. As you had to be.

I shook out a bag of baseballs
and the last one gave me trouble,
and I knew when I pulled it out
that your eyes and your smile
would be two spots and a long seam
awaiting me. We expected each other.

A long way I came on that trail,
a long way looked into that sky,
a long time held that baseball
in my palm, and always you
everywhere. You were always
in the cards. A fruition. As you were
when you shot like a marble
from your mother, it was a dark night

and the lights on at the end
of a long hall, and no one in the room
to coax you out, to reach into the bag
to catch you. And absent the doctor
I spread my arms. And caught you.

The day after

That next day I cracked two eggs
and because I was a little careless
(as I am, sometimes, cracking eggs)
I had to step to the silverware drawer
and retrieve a small spoon to scoop
out two tiny bits of shell that made it
into the cracking bowl. And I swirled
around the half moon of the kitchen
as I did most mornings, methodically,
setting out a large plate and a fork
and knife and a paper towel napkin,
and pulled the butter from its place
and opened the bread drawer to fish
out two slices of pumpernickel
and dropped them into the toaster
and turned the stove knob to halfway
between high and medium to let
the pan warm – if you slather the oil
before the pan is sufficiently hot
the eggs will baste in the black
death jelly of the slow-fired oil – and
while the pan heated up I pulled out
the OJ and shook the container hard
and pulled down a glass and set it
along with the napkin and fork neatly
upon the small space on the counter
she always reserved for eating that
exact same breakfast I'd made for her
maybe two thousand times before,
and after I'd flipped the eggs and
slid them onto her plate and buttered
the pumpernickel bread just so
I set down the plate on the counter
and let it sit there full but untouched
until lunchtime. Then fed it to the dogs.

To each his Jill, his Magdalene, his cow

How rotten to be named Jack
and find yourself wandering the white sands
of a child's book night after night, impervious
to whatever lessons you've learned – forgetful, oblivious,
never knowing, as the story plays out, whether you're
going to make happily-ever-after, or even make it at all –
cruising the clouds, ducking behind make believe wardrobes
to avoid make believe giants. Playing the angles, catching
some breaks. Biding your time.

It's a hell of a script, but say you're Jack nonetheless,
Beanstalk Jack, living the same life day after day, fixing
the hinge, milking the cow, weeding your mother's small plot,
and then one morning you see a way out. Or up. Mind you,
you exist at the pleasure of editors and publishers. And far
from a tony address, you've carved out only this miserable
locus of being, chiefly on the page, or worse – in your less
corporeal moments – upon the tongue of a divorced dad
at the tail end of two nights with his kids. So, my boy, no
matter how thin the night air of the nursery, get used to it.
You're already used to the grind: being taken, for instance,
on your very first road trip, duped in the matter of a cow
by a man who offers bupkis, only a smile and some beans
barely bigger than birdseed.

Page forward to see yourself swimming in more hot water.
Because wives have a way of throwing themselves at you,
and big, angry husbands intent on blood, and these sorts
of lessons come fast. There's also the threat of grinding, not
the pleasant kind, but a real grinding, which makes you shiver
in your bones wondering if you'll ever get to lead a normal life
with a small fire in the hearth when you drive home half-
soused each night, cursing your boss and longing for nothing
so much as an open sports page and your favorite chair,
perhaps a pipe, and two children and a dog close by, just not
too close; and maybe that's the best of it: elbow patches and
the affordable smell of mac & cheese wafting from a kitchen
papered decades ago with bluebells and fairies.

Sort of like the life of Jesus
as Kazantzakis imagined it
towards the end of his book.

Buddy, welcome to the real world. I hate to be the bearer,
but there's more to this game than the clean shimmy up
a beanstalk. You need things. Us. You need us to believe.
Even Jesus lives at the pleasure of publishers and popes
and depends on the premise that nobody swipes a book
stashed in a hotel drawer. Sometimes you make it to the top,
Jack. Sometimes fall. Sometimes a skinned knee. Sometimes
more. For every flim, a flam. Sometimes you pull it off.
Sometimes not. Slick as you are, the stalk is slicker.
We have to make the best of it.

Even if your family is meager and matriarchal, a real drag
and indefatigably disapproving. Even though you have
this long unknowable climb ahead of you. And look at you
now, fresh out of excuses. Yes, you, with those two trick knees
and that fear of heights, and god knows what the lumbering
oaf at the top will come up with next. Like a boss. Does he
ever learn? When he falls to sleep, will he feign it, one eye
open, or dream of offbeat endings? Do you? Does he catch up
with you in some rendition, sweet Jack, defrauder, music thief,
chicken snatcher, to recapture his harp and golden eggs
and snuff you like a stink bug?

Better times lie in the pages ahead – it gladdens me to tell
you – so no use comparing yourself to that raft of other Jacks,
like Spratt, who's forced to explore the infelicities of foul fare
unto eternity; or the worst-lucked of your lot, that unbranded
clumsy Jack known to every toddler, the one who winds up gob-
smacked while tumbling down a hill with his gossamer maiden.
As in real life, the story ends with the twain in a jumble – this Jill
with her mother's mothers' wiles enticing him into believing that
he's the dynamo, she the janissary, meek and mere, inching them
ever closer towards union, just a sweet couple chasing a humble
domestic vision: fetching a pail of water. Hardly the sort of thing
worth busting a crown over, much less a cap.

But you should know, my clutch of Jacks, that little's really yours
to say; the steerage of your course no more your own than ours
ours. Come clasp hands, then, with the rest of us, pixies, prelates,
poets. Divinity or no, things often end in ruin, egg on your face,
egg on a wall. There's your lesson, your blessed moral. Children
blanch at these fairytales, yet howl for them in spite of themselves,
res ipsa loquitur, delighted to endure the long lead of a story
just to relish the short fall.

Breathless

Yes, Jill, it was a terrible fall.
Terrifying. But remember
how we looked at each other
when we found ourselves
in that tangle at the bottom?
Remember how you fought
against your excitement, then
opened to it?

I recall the slant of the sun
across your perfect brow,
and how your bosom heaved
as in the worst of the romance
novels. The finest moment
of my life. I know you will blush,
my love, but the best part
was the part they leave out
of the storybooks.

How we made love at the foot
of that little hill. How lush
the grass. How painful our scrapes
and bruises. But the beauty
of that pain. How we ached
and loved. How many times
I reached into the bottomless
well of you, Jill, and how
many times you lost your breath
in a tumble of goodness and grace.

Smokey Joe's

Say it's a Saturday, Summer of Love, U of P campus,	standing in the din standing in the dim shallows of Smokey Joe's	on a day so faceless it barely ends	go missing, or is it just thee & me
Walnut & 38th. Say it's a bar & grill corner, much like	waiting on burgers his dad had phoned in. Cards. Beers. Co-eds.	in y, call it a shadeless summer day,	indulging ourselves, taking our leave of things
any, a few steps from my dad's clothing store.	Casablanca. Carthage. Byzantium. All the happy	call it what you will. Call it one more scum	and then displacing the blame? Today, for example, I wonder
Say his business is dead, drowned in a sea of tie dye	inducements of hell made flesh in a single room	of words among so many, a litter of notions sunlit	if there even was a real life Joe grizzled and gruff
and bell bottom. Say this unwilling conscript sorting	and none of it for me. I was less than a moth	and strangling a story, a few facts filtered by time	as a South Philly street. Or just my version of Smokey Joe's Tavern
rep ties and blazers might break away to swim the inland	on a temple bell. I was a cypher. Me. Mere. Merde. Say it's cheap	through pose. As facts are wont. Everything blows under the sun.	in friable recall, a firmament littered oh so gently
sea of smoke roiling the plenum of Mr. Joe's den	and easy to write about the past, about what was,	Wood, splinter, blossom, thorn. Are words things? Are facts? Notions?	with starfire. Cards. Beers. Co-eds. Less a tap room, more a set piece. Smokey
of exoticism, cards, beers, co-eds forbid the likes	what might have been. Those sorts of things. Say this is just one	Are stories just accretion, just heaps of things? –	Joe's in all its 60's glory, this melancholy marvelous almost movie set,
of me – this nothing, this five-foot flyweight high school kid	instance more, a few letters set down in the swale of a back room	and when things go missing, do they truly	a secret I wasn't quite in on. Not yet.

Mink in the closet

She never told us they were valuable, per se, not in so many words. But still, you knew. You knew. A lingering row of them, short, mid-length, full body / sable, fox, mink, chinchilla / and yes, even a plucky off-the-shoulder peekaboo wrap. Some were her mother's once. Some, once, her aunts'.

All spaced evenly, very evenly in her closet, a realm forbidden us, my sister, myself. Sometimes they'd go to a concert, then supper – he in a tux, black tie, his feathered cashmere fedora / she in lipstick so deep it must have flooded from her heart, two light dabs of perfume, just so, a little black number

to show off her overlong legs – and since it was winter, mostly, where we lived, a fur. She was always wrapped in a spathe of fur, posh, plush, always a fur ferocious in its fullness. But when they left us – mind, we were just silly kids – left us, you might say, to our devices, we'd often as not invade their closets

and emerge in his tie-up Oxfords with their tiny air holes tipping the toes, her spiky heels, his ties spun sugar laced with anchors, dots, and her scarves, mounds of them, scarves trailing like breadcrumbs from the scene of our crime down the stairs and into the parlor, tripping over his nicely cuffed trousers,

dragging the hems of her finest dresses over the knobby wood floors / oh hell, we'd make a regular night of it, saucing ourselves on sardines and Stilton in front of the black & white TV. And my sister's grown into a woman who loves women, and she always dresses in casual black, and so does

the woman she loves, a gorgeous couple, chic, au courant, and fur so far out of fashion that she's abandoned them all to me . . . our mother's furs, her mother's, our aunts' . . . this long decay that's slunk along the generations. And sometimes I slip into a deep closet on the third floor of our home

just to savor what entropy breeds. Though no one has a taste for loss, who can turn from a stately decline? And I kneel on the unswept boards of this closet my wife has no use for, this neglected plenum stale with things no one has a use for, to catch a whiff of something I can almost / not quite / name.

Sit

I met Mister Big once.
His eyes were red round the rims,
and when he spoke
to me, he spoke
through me. It started
like a guilty thing
upon a fearful
summons. Sit, he said.

He told me that love
is a job, just the worst paid job
in the world. He said that every job's
a cage, and every boss
a son of a bitch. No matter
how even the smile. No matter
how soft the whip.

He told me about constancy
and why to crack wry at the trope
of the moon. Reflected light. Cold,
hard. The slow gallop from one sky
to another. He told me about treason.

Treachery. He told me that I would
never see it coming, no matter
how open the windows, the doors.

It should hurt more, somehow,
to say how right he was:
they should put warning labels
on wedding cakes. He said that.
He said that you should learn to read
your spouse. And then forget
every word you've read. He spoke
as an episteme. As one who knows.

They should put warning labels
on schools, which teach the virtues
of conformity. On books,
which rail against it. He
told me that. He told me
that reading will set you free,
but that freedom is a torment.

My god, but I'm in on a fat batch
of secrets now. And it's high time.
I'm going on seventy-two, and I know
what I know. A promiscuity, of sorts.

Of women,
more than I ever thought
to know. Of love, next to nothing.
Winged once, clodpoll ever after.

Here's something for you to unravel:
what every woman wants
no woman wants. A rope
without strings. A song
without words.

Of writing, of this sort, how to's –
how to chuff a line's breath
with a comma. Where to end
a line. Of rhyme, where
to draw the line. Of simile,
how far to bend.

*What any artist wants
none can say. The artist
least of all. – Mister Big*

Of art, I know a little.
Once I stood in front of this
Ansel Adams New Mexican
moonrise mounted on a wall
of the old Sotheby's gallery
on Madison at 76th
and took in from a high floor
the hard scrabble of life, hard
work, hard luck, the graveyard,
and it struck me that we make
our own luck, each of us, that
each moment's the decisive
moment, that each enacts
a once-in-a-lifetime culture
if we take notice and bloom
within it. And I wept.

I wept for that aristocracy
of skill and sepulture
wed like the Arnolfinis. But
all done up in blacks and grays.
I wept for the toxic passage
of the seasons. It was the seventies.
I wept for the act of weeping.

He told me certain things
I'd tell that boy I've outgrown,
though time doesn't work that way.
Time does not love the mirror.

But still, to look once more
upon that molted face! Sweetly
astonished at what I'd have to say.
Abashed. I can see his dimpled smile
clean as a comet in a clear sky.

Why tell him, so early on,
that comets burn out? Why speak to him
of betrayal, its odd appointments?
Or love. Why speak of that,
of which so little
for so long? Or death.
Soon enough, granted.
But not yet.

Enough, then, of smudged philosophies,
of wingèd chariots that snatch the breath.
With no hope of repent or reprieve,
today I'll play Mister Big: accused, jurist,
jack off, judge. You play the jury
and render the final decree:
He's got it right. He's full of it.
Whatever, wherever, a tender violence.

We've plenty of time to test
the rest of the sentence.
So keep that rocker to yourself.
For the nonce, you sit. I'll stand.
And all the rest,
the rest is silence.

Like you

I was a strange kid.
My mother knew it, but she was too polite
to point it out to anyone but my father
who was too busy watching Cowboys cheerleaders
to take any notice. The TV wasn't even on. Here,
I said, this was a shoebox yesterday
when you made me buy shoes
that will earn me a schoolyard beating
if you ever get me to wear them,
which I won't,
but today this box
is the box where George Washington kept his toy trains
and masturbatory materials. Or materiel, if you get off
on jokes like that. Anyway, mom said it's not nice
to make jokes like that, about the trains. As there
were none. The rest of it
she let slide. I went out to a tree to ask about Mozart
because I'd heard that he set down the casual thrum
within his notes upon leaves, but the tree
was humming to itself
as if on a fine sauternes. Making its own music.
Very conventional, I might add.
I came back in and the TV was still
as a cardinal hiding in a confessional
with salt on his lips and a smile wide
as a dolphin's. Dolphins being saltwater fish
except they're not, they're warm blooded
and mammals, like my dad and George Washington
and a priest in his scarlet vestments, all of whom,
all of whom, like me, are here and now
as there and then, and were – I am
taking a guess here – strange kids.

Domestic slippage

We're having a time,
drinking and careless and happy.
Lemon slices slit before us.

Happy in a mindful way, of course,
because happiness must be minded.
And times, and ways. Minded.
Because happiness is fickle. O love,
the ways happiness is inflected.
Modulated. Payed out.
The ways our lines pay out.

All the rest is silence.
Because negligence is expensive.
Because retraction is not possible.
Because time is hard.
And eggshells are not.
And this is the way we walk.
And words are fields of mines.

The eggshell of marriage
comes with a charge. Each of us
perched on the edge of a glass,
lipstick, smoke, careful not to fall in
too far, just so far, and so
speckled with modulations.

This evening is like the sea,
and not – *like* in its ebbs
and flows, *like* in the way
we are never sure
of our footing; yet *not*,
because no things
are fixed things – nothing
like the tides – and we mustn't
trust our balance, love, not
even in the shallow pools.
Not even on the bank.

Something riparian
in us all.

Each of us part water,
part spite.

We laugh at something.

Maybe the way philosophers laugh
when they have debated something
for a time, a good long time,
and decided that it's worth a laugh.
The payout a careful deliberation.

Mindful.
Mindful even as sheep
are shepherded, one eye closed
against the sun, one eye
open for wolves.

When we lose ourselves for a moment,
say something stupid, that gut wrench
is all there is, grasping for balance,
rebalance, the sure thing
being the knowledge
that there's no net beneath.
All the rest is silence.

And the wire hundreds
of feet in the air.

So we are drinking, and the liquor
oils and loosens, just as it's meant
to do, and we are unguarded
for a moment, just the slightest crack
a perfect chance
for the gremlins to slide in.
To dance on the thoughtlessly frank.
On slippages. Love, love, the trove
of past mistakes.
Its juicy possibilities
now sliced like lemons
right in front of us.
All the rest is silence.

Denny's

It is the second day of November
2022 and five days' turning
will get me to 71
save bad drivers
and falling rocks
though
falling leaves
are a matter entire

and ten years this week
a fiasco in our lives
nothing to you
something to us

and the garden outside my window
new planted ten years ago
and the kids ten years younger
and Buster Posey led the league that year
in batting and took the MVP

but Buster's gone from baseball now
though he's still young and learning
there's life after baseball
as we're still learning there's life
after cataclysm

while life for a whole decade
it turns out
can go down like acid
staring back from a coffee cup
come 3:00 a.m. at a Denny's counter

and I should also mention
that ten years ago our little town
still had a Denny's sitting open
at all hours like an empty heart
waiting to be filled with something
I used to think actually existed

but now the Denny's is gone, too.

The Cloud

It confers a species of immortality.

Here, to begin, all your friends
queue quietly, neatly, alphabetically,
first names last, last names first,
it doesn't matter. They're all
right here. Under one roof.

Here is your music. A fingerprint.
Who else but you would line up
k.d. lang in *Shadowland* and Mozart
and Joja Wendt, Amy Winehouse
and The Mavericks and so much
of the worst of Elvis and most
of the Bee and the Best of Waylon
and snatches of Wylan reading,
of *Four Quartets*, of Dylan Thomas –
a different sort of music – and Janis,
Deano and Nana Mouskouri?
Over how much boogie woogie
piano can one obsess? A lot. It's got
your name all over it, that line up.

Dig out your phone and take
a moment with your photo gallery.
Here are the rusty roofs of Florence
laid out as a storm of flower pots
from a fourth story window. Snap.
And here, the sea, its permutations
reduced to some fluid pixels as
you slice the sleepy waters from
Aruba to Antigua. Snap. I once
got married in Antigua. Snap.
Here are the moments of your life
you meant to capture. And some
you didn't, but someone caught them
anywho. You have to love the Cloud.

Even after you're gone, you persist.
Heaven for religionists. Heaven for
agnostics. Common, wispy ground.

Let me tell you a secret

If you want to rivet a friend, or even
a stranger, just someone on a train,
bend close and say something like
Let me tell you a secret, brother. [Sister.]
Something I've never told anyone.

That's a Call me Ishmael.
Good start. But where
do we go from here?
Stories are what we have
in place of secrets. Song, sometimes,
in place of stories.
Personal fables. Private myths.

Everyone has a yarn or two,
a seduction gone risibly awry,
everyone has a tale robed in ribbons
of light and revelation. (And God
help you if you're on the receiving
end, if it's a *revealed* truth. The worst.)

Better a basket of embellishments.
I love to parse hyperbole. I love
the juiciest story, to glory in someone
else's grief. Or even bathe in the mud
of my own. But only for a bit.
Just so many takes on nobility,
loss, betrayal. His. Hers.

You might be a rag picker
on the heap of nostalgia, but
what value the forks in the road
that you – and only you –
can appreciate?

What ifs. From a distance:
What if you'd carried that towel
to the eager girl at the top of those stairs
instead of stolidly tossing it up? And she
a study of barest concealment. But
who hasn't played the bumpkin, only
to recline into the pillow of wisdom
years later?

The insults of the river

I was leaving the cigar shop early
because the Orioles were losing (again)
and I'd had quite enough of tobacco
and losing when this lady stopped me
to ask the time. And I told her Ma'am,
I have no idea. My watch has stopped.

I didn't tell her the rest of the story:
that it had stopped back in 2012, as
best I reckon, that time's a river, that
my fingernails are short, too short
to be digging under the little wheel
that will goose the gears into action,

and besides, who cares what a watch
will say about a river, its insistence?
Because I can just feel it. In my wrist,
sure, which will never be the same,
not after a fall on the ice. Nor my
shoulder. My knee. My left big toe.

Then I turned around and walked
back in and the guys looked up
and asked if I hadn't had enough
of losing, and what could I say as
I settled into the worn leather chair
but No. Not quite enough. Not yet.

Haiki

He mourns Rebecca.
An eagle hath not so green
an eye. Pale fire.

*

Tales are what we have
in place of secrets. Sometimes
song in place of tales.

*

And what could I say
then, as I settled into
the worn leather chair?

*

Sweeping in bare feet:
the true test of the poet
laying out her poem.

*

I simply ignore
my wrist when it parodies
the river's rushing.

*

Torrential in parts.
Calm in others. My woman,
Yangtze, I love you.

*

He wrote a haiku.
It had seven syllables
in the middle line.

Fingerprints in the Louvre

The painters find themselves fixed
in amber, flies trapped in syrup.
A listless batting of the wings.

Flies. A procession of frogs passes
before them. Gesturing. Sizing
them up. Such hungers.

This is your life, too, need
I say? Chambered. Fixed.
The fingers of the world

at your feet. Claspings your ankles.
Your life. Mine. And no matter
their feints, these painters' lives

spelt stroke by stroke. What could
be more delicious than that
which escapes the painter

unawares? An errancy beyond wit
or witting, the wet fart
that suggests with such precision

what there was for lunch.
Such tattling tongues. Such
circumlocution. Such prattle.

How they wish to deceive.
To turn your head
from their fingerprints

to the shadows. No dice.
Paint is true as one drink too many.
Deception discloses even as it conceals.

The slow boat

is the one that takes so long
to get something to you
that your interest in whatever it was
dries up long before it arrives,
or you even forget the matter entire

until the day the semaphores wave
and the boat goes toot! toot!
so's you can feel the notes
in your gut, and the docks shake
and the slow boat breathes its last
and collapses prone at the pier
where men and women like ants
swarm over it and unpack every cell
of the slow boat

and then somehow
route whatever it was, or maybe
still is, to you, and you look up in surprise
when they hand it to you,

you being very like our dog, prone to startle,
the way she sits on the curb out front
sunning dawn to dusk, guarding a road
that never has any traffic, or almost never,
so that when something crests the horizon

it's a surprise, and when it comes
roaring up she has to focus, she has to shake
herself to be reminded of what she's supposed
to do, which is chase it for a ways
and then give up – roused at last,
though sleepy now for all that effort –

but she's an old dog and that's pretty much
what you'd expect of her, which is fine,
but then what does that say about me
(who's not so old in people years
as she in dog years) who, when an idea
roars by, chases after it for a while, yet
rarely catches anything but the wind?

Poem for my brother

My twin. You went your way early. I went mine.

Still, we talk. Phones, the opiate of the aging class.
No texts for us. Just a good honest bodiless voice
laughing about something that did or did not happen
fifty or sixty years ago. A good honest voice
on the other end of a ground line. Funny we both
chose ground lines. Nature or nurture?

We talk about our kids, large bounties, small banes.
We talk about the women we married. Criteria.
Taste. We talk about our tastes as if they were buds
in our mouths. What budded once. What's budding.

We talk about the cousins who've drifted away,
those small boats made of yesterday's papers.
Somewhere out on the sea of seas, their sails,
like ours, sometimes empty, sometimes full.
Well, we assume a fullness. How can we know?
We try their numbers, maybe twice a decade.
We leave our names. They don't call back.

We talk about mom and pop
as though all that past life, that real life
were now just a movie ripe for review.

We talk about politics, if we have the stomachs,
we talk about polemics, even poems. How odd
that you read them and I write them, and why
not the other way around? Oh brother,
where art thou? I need an anchor to the past,
and a candle, even a small one, for the future.

I miss you in ways that beggar words. Or maybe
I'm simply tired tonight, willing to settle for cliché
because sometimes clichés get it just so.

The point is, I've left a light on. You're welcome,
always, at any hour. So drop a dime.

Are you any less real because I've made you up?

Theodicy

And he wondered, is there good in this world
that someways balances the evil?
And a large black ant wandered
into his field of vision.

But while he was making that hammer fall
decision, blot, no blot, the large black
ant scurried under a baseboard

and so he turned then
to the complacencies of the day,
to his computer's daily log
of weight, meds, calories consumed

and set up the day's parameters

and thought to make a page
for the next day, too, but chose
not to tempt a hammer
he could never bring himself
to believe in.

Chances are

for Stephen Dunn

If someone asks
if he can be honest with you,
chances are whatever comes next
won't be.

It works a lot like *but*,
the word *but*, a conjunction,
but often a desecration,
and always a good bet
to annihilate whatever
rambled down the path
just ahead of it. Sometimes
instructive, always destructive.

In my humble opinion –
is like to be an opinion, sure,
but humble? Please.
A dead lock
to be full of itself. A glass
spilling over its sides.
Not just a glass. A chalice.

Of course isn't always necessarily.

Of course we have friends,
interlocutors
with whom we can be lonely
in good company.
And there is, really,
under heaven, such a thing
as goodwill.

Or so it's said. Which could
be the crucible of truth,
that tiny phone booth
of the imagination
from which some lady's calling
to be honest with you.
To enlighten you.

But whatever goodwill
might animate
the unsought courtesies
of her pedagogy –
or call it what it is,
meddling – chances are
you are in every way,
in all ways, a long ways
more complex than that.

Complex?

A sommelier will tell you
that this or that wine
is complex, but you know
a one-trick pony when
you see one. Just a good nose
and some long legs
sliding down a glass.
And that's about it.
No grape talker's
your better, ape.
Likewise the lady,
all goodwill and politesse,
this lady who's never done
so much as ten feet
in your clogs. Simply
a study in circumlocution.

Nor is goodwill always
an engine of good.
Sometimes it's a disguise.
A wolf, a gobbler.

Sometimes what seems goodwill
is but an angel gone bad,
is but a server serving himself
just after closing, a long long pour,
sitting and thinking about last shift.
How much was wrong with it.
With people. How little right.

So if I can be honest with you,
chances are the server's thoughts
will be those of a fellow
on his way home
stopped for a moment
in some park
somewhere
flat drunk on his side –
one eye open
and staring across
the spiraling grass,
marveling how tall
it is. He's thinking
the moon has fallen
into the grass.

Don't we all want
what we can never have?
The moon in the sky. The moon
in the grass. Some grass.

The pleasures
of vague desiring.

Can I be half honest with you?
That's just a perspective.

In this case, mine.

Surveillance works
from outside in,
but reflection works
from inside out.

The way a wine unfolds
upon itself
after it's been sitting
a good long time, a proper time
in a proper goblet.
Not just a glass.
A chalice.

Outage

Today a day
of random rain
and no promise of better.

The birds, as ever, restless.
Restless and unrelenting –
an argument between
reluctance and resurgence.

*

A man has a notion he wishes
to paint upon the cave wall
of his monitor. For no good
reason. Many reasons,
just no good ones.

*

Thoughts.
Some fly south.
Or north.
Many reasons.
Just no good ones.

Now some lightning
slices his skies. He scurries.
He needs a little
more time.

*

He knows that the heart's jet
gushes into his keyboard
at the mercy of various weathers,
his own – an interior clime –
as well as whatever is going on
short term and brutal
beyond his windows,
that which has no mercy,

the enemy of memory,
the falling tree, ice
on the lines,

and he knows as well
that a moment's failure
in those lines can prove fatal
as the stoppage of a heart

which is said to skip
at times, at times to stop,
but may never stop
for too long

lest it lose itself
for good, however accustomed
to restoration.

*

Ice on the lines,
more than a figure.

*

Will this be the moment
the lights go out, runes
swaddled by the cipher
of a black screen?
The glyphs. The words.
Will this be the moment
it occurs to him that
they are like love? That
they cannot be saved?

*

The words disappear.
Or they don't. But will.
Just a matter of time.

Teen mother

Twins
behind her
in a red wagon.

The dark moons
of her unhappiness
drag along
the tides.

Longing

O, to be a fat
red strawberry
waiting by
a vat of melted
chocolate.

Tinder

As I helped her
into her coat

I slid my fingers
beneath her dress.

A model of patient
compliance, she

grinned at me
over her shoulder.

She was one
to recognize

a man of
lower ambitions.

She said

She said

She said

she might

She said

she might

have

She said

she might

have

enjoyed it

She said

she might

have

enjoyed it

more

For You

I always thought
it would be good
to write a poem
meant to be read
on a cell phone,
the slender column
of words sparkling
like rain down
a spiraling gutter
and pooling
at the bottom
of the screen
into something
small, a small
idea, nothing
profound, just
a notion exactly
the right size
for the reader.

Mind the gap

When she spoke, he listened.
When he spoke, she listened.

What he heard wasn't of necessity
what she said.

Vice-versa.

The steel wheels of conversation
grind to a halt. The doors open,
just for a moment, then close.
The wheels resume.

Mind the gap.

Kansas

It begins with
something unbaked,
half-baked, a whimsy,
an urge, a notion.

And the great balloon fills
with hot air
and you jump in
and toss out the sandbags
and catch the wind
and Kansas.

117669030460994

So many ways to make a dirty joke.

Diminishment

Shall I compare you to a summer's day?

The Hubble Bible

1:1 In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth and ten trillion quintillions of undubbables, some of which dwarfed a small blue bubble that kings soon took for their own.

1:2 And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters, here, there, most everywhere, and very possibly expended itself such that It appears everywhere all at once as stardust reconstituted into beer cans and beef cakes and bridges and the crusty brine of the oyster.

1:3 And God said, Let there be light: and there was light, and a cosmic redshift as well, which He left to James Webb, left to the time when His children had grown past caves and fires and turned their eyes upon the heavens. And they came to see that the sun as chariot is trope. And God scratched His massive head, twiddled His fingers and beguiled the hours until Homo sapiens could navigate that gulf by creating serpents and apples and sheep. And numbers, of course. To count the sheep. And He called the sheep people. Or sheeple. And He gave them voice and the freedom to worship Him. And only Him. Or else. And so God pointed His people towards the light.

1:4 And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness, and kept each of His notions from black holes and dark energies and unified theories and quasi-entropic measures and multiverses and was left shaking His head or heads in awe.

1:5 And God called the light Day, and the darkness He called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first day on one comically tiny planet in a backwater galaxy far from the central action of the cosmos.

1:6 And God took a seat upon His gilded throne and set down some rules to follow. And these (to the argumentative, the contrarian, the skeptic) could easily be taken for petulant and petty, the scribblings of a narcissist. Or a priest. Or a nest of priests, hissing. But laws are laws. Laws, granted, lackin' a little sumpin' in the way of imagination, laws fashioned to tamp down the urge to probe, laws requiring improbable leaps of faith. Celestial chains. The sort of system a czar might devise for a serf. Little of logic, less still of fatherly love. And God sent Abraham up a hill, meantime, to murder his son, and He drowned his failed experiments. And the seasons passed. And lenses were invented, and mirrors, and motors so powered as to slip the surly bonds.

1:7 And we sat in our classrooms and argued in reductive circle in our dorm rooms, and out on the lawns more chit than chat, pencils in hand, our minds science at the speed of thought, and we made points on our papers with our pencils, and the points glistened like little stars under the trees.

1:8 And the points were suffused with the light of reason, and we came to witness the natural glories of the cosmos, which are an infinitude, and none requiring the existence of a god.

1:9 And God disclosed that the light was made of particles and could bend in space, and time might dance within it, which even He could not explain, and God bowed his head in shame and conceded that He was just a charlatan from the tiny town of Crete, Indiana. And it was good.

0:0 And the prophets and the shepherds and the carpenters bowed their heads and admitted that they had been in on it since the get-go, ever since they made up a god to explain the heaven and the earth and the fraud they called religion, and they used it to build cathedrals and collect alms and bully the people they laughingly called their flock. And the sheeple sang in their pens.

I was never famous enough

I was never famous enough for anyone to have written anything compelling about me, so there will be no compilation of stories and rhymes and meters for anyone to pick over.

There was a poet laureate, Dick Allen, who once compared me in print to a great American poet. He had some pretty rich things to say, but they've fallen now down the well of sorrows

with just about every other book printed back in that year, with every prognostication, every parsing of the literary entrails. So I'll have no haruspex, then, no executor, no admiring

graduate student looking to discover greatness in an unexpected place and turn it into a thesis. Though I have, in its stead, a theory, a small one, call it an aspiration, better a sweet hope,

that once in a long while one of my few books will be unshelved and thumbed through just long enough for someone to stop and say Nice line. Nice stanza. I wish I'd written that.

And I am so unfamous that he might. He might turn into a magpie and feather his nest with some little flight of magic, not his own, but now his as much as anyone's. And get away with it.

Peripatetic

I would like to take some poem of mine and hand it to a good translator to see it rendered into Chinese, then take the Chinese version and pack it off to a Hungarian, take that new poem and have it done up in Portuguese, and so on and so on, like a bird freed from its cage flying through a mansion of a hundred rooms, the little manuscript sloughing its virtue at the violence of it, reborn under the fire of a hundred suns.

The pursuit of beauty

It doesn't matter where.

It doesn't care.

It doesn't matter what your tools are.

It doesn't matter what you have to work with,
the material, the rawness of it.
Just be authentic.

The quantity of your failure,
it doesn't matter, just the quality of it,
how you must keep pushing
until you finally find the sand
in your belly, the stones in your mouth,
the consolations of grit.

It doesn't care about esteem,
just persistence, and so
I applaud the weeds
on our patio even as I root them,
the weeds in their quiet
that insist upon a presence
where we cannot abide them.

It doesn't matter if it is cooking
or fixing or adding or selling
or driving or writing or healing.

It cares about precision and persistence
the way the sun cares. Every day.
Every moment. It doesn't matter when.

Doesn't matter where.

Doesn't care.

i.

I am older now, and when I love
I love with the light touch
of the flycaster, finally past
the abandon of the shark
filling its mouth and belly
mindlessly.

How darkness once drew me,
whether to the broken spirit
or to shadows pooling around
a pinch of skin.

But now I countenance the light.

I find runes and consolations
in the constellation of the flower head,
mysteries to rival the cosmic swirl.

And the unburst flower still ripening
on its stalk, serious in its silks,
unbudded and quiet and uncertain . . .
I have learned to love that flower.

I have learned to love that flower
as it rises in the silence of its song
to burst the calyx
flashing a foam of fire
cresting tumbling
this furious fountain of light.

ii.

We have been twenty-three years
within each other. We are made
of stars, girl, aged yet succulent,
and molding your flesh
I touch it
as my own
and the skin of the stars,
all of it, and when
I look upon you sleeping
I see water
tending through a sluice
towards the deep.

Love is more modest now.

We are older, girl,
and you have fallen
into the midday, just
dozing on your couch,
your flesh unguarded and tumbling
from your shift, and these breasts
you so demeaned
when you were young,
demanding a perfection,
demanding the impossible,
they are mottled
as butterscotch to my tongue,
though it is a long time
since you have given yourself to me.

iii.

Not love
but a remembrance
of fire in our sheets,
that which smolders
without smoke.

Not wood
but a low gas fire
in our fireplace,
that which burns
without burning.

Love / Not love

Not love,
god no, it wasn't love you wanted,
you wanted to be taken
in abandon, in rage, rent
as a rag doll
in a wolf's mouth, a rush of sleaze
spit and subjugation,
and made yourself up
as a doll knowing you'd end
smeared, torn, bruised, broken, forced
to the will of the inchoate, dark
and downward and drained, opening
all of yourself to ravishment,
the impulse to be overpowered
and let it lead where it lead,
opened fully, helpless,
no impulse too dark, too raw,
and not because it felt so good
but because of your fealty
to the dark, so filthy a fidelity
that you could not make it happen
on your own. A kind of love.

The night that I moved in

the night that I moved in with the Crush
was the night after my wife was late
getting home, and she couldn't explain
where she'd been, but I'd already checked
with her sister, and I caught her sister lying
for her, her sister said that my wife and she
were going to a little patisserie, and I said
fine, let me talk to her then, since her cell
is going to voice mail, and her sister said no,
that they were in separate cars, that my wife
was in the car ahead of her, so then I asked
my sister-in-law to read me her sister's
license plate, and that was about it, the jig
being up and so forth, and when my wife
got home I was loaded with words, words
like oranges in a canvas bag, and I beat her
and beat her with the words, beat her
until the truth came out, and then I thought
about this girl who had come up to me
one night after a poetry reading, and she
was about a hundred nothing and maybe
five seven, all arcs and curves, and blonde
and black hair emo style, and glitzy eye liner
and wine dark lips, and hornet-waisted
and lovely, and she'd asked me to sign
something and then she said put your
number next to your name and I said
look, I'm married, and she said, well, you
never know, and she wrote her number
on the sheaf of poems I was carrying,
and I pulled out the poems the next night
after my wife came home late, and I started
to look through them, and some of them
were about my wife, love poems, I guess
they were a celebration of what now was
a was, and the Crush picked up the phone
and said I was hoping you'd call some day,
and I don't know what I said just then, but
it ended with come over, just come over,
and I did, and that was the night after
my wife was late, the night I left a mansion
for a flop, the night I moved in with the Crush.

Trying

I know the gulf of the years,
the way it swallows fancy
and ambition the way the sun
swallows a meteor, fizzing it
before it gets too close.

I know that the number 45
is wider than the vault
of the Grand Canyon.
That it is a crypt as deep.
I know. I know.

I know that you are beautiful,
that you are beautiful right now,
and that what there was once
of my beauty was drained
before you were made.

I know that my voice is terrible
with its corrections and insistence
on precision, that no matter
how I try to defuse my bluster
it sometimes erupts in your face.

I know that the seasons confer
some worldliness, two bits or so
of bluff, yet never forget that
what seems to you sophistication
is merely exposition. O love,

I am held by the hard chain
of imperative. Of circumstance.
Split by the sharp spear of time.
I am trying to find our way. I am
trying to find a way to love you.

The victim

I knew a woman. She kept her circle large. Loose. I don't think
it was out of lust, unless the hunger for validation be considered
a lust. She used her body more as a test of love than its exemplar.

I have known others. Not like her. I have known the power and
surety of a woman seasoned and full-fledged, riven truly by the
carnal, the lewd, those private public musics. Driven by angels
of desiring. Not like her. Grown women. Women oceanic. Seas
of flame. Sharing their torments. Women who sear. Are seared.

And I can divine a self-deceiver, a fraud maundering in the park.

How she longed to be the statue. How feared she was the shade.

Here is a temple, here a stained-glass window, a sacred progress
upon it. Here is her body. Here is her arm. Here is a rock.

Testing, like a child, always testing, pushing, pushing, do you love
me, do you love me enough, do you love me enough to love me
in the face of this, that, always floating whatever might provoke a
response or – better – a crisis. Whatever will crush. Always gauging
how far the edge, how deep the iron must slash before it hits bone.

Her dirk of choice, disclosure. How many straws might she drop
upon a lover's back until he slumps to his knees under the falls of
casual revelation? What better armor for one who fears rejection
than to tempt it? For one who craves fidelity than to mock it?

She juggled her traumas, she joyed in ruinations, feared nothing
so much as convention, being defrocked, cast as normal, would
choose always the road leading to the theater and its dramas, never
the one that conduced to the hush of a civil sane and quiet garden.

One who decries drama the loudest lives for its churn. One who
curries destruction must destroy. One unthrown from the boat
will overboard herself. She who fears abandonment longs to
be abandoned, if only that she might cry then her victimhood.

She took comfort in being the victim. It was her familiar shore.

You are squatting

on your roof,
and how you even got up here
in the first place,
that's one question, and why
in the name of Christ you bothered,
that's another,
not to mention how you managed
to get yourself into this hot tar pickle

so far from your cell phone
on a Friday afternoon
preceding a holiday weekend.

But wait!

What of your bookend concerns –
those of grub and john? –
all issues of the utmost import
now roosting on this solitary rooftop
much as a convocation of mendicants,
like a murder of ravens
winging in to give the stink eye
to a murmuration of starlings.

But local ornithology aside
(most especially since a lamentation of swans
is unlike to join the artless nest of you commoners
up on this roof),
the topic of the hour is –

what with you, mind you,
some thirty-ish feet in the air
with nothing but brackish trash cans
on one side of the house, hard scabble
on the other, a brambly bush on yet one more,
the whirl and chafe of a generator on the last –

the damned question is,
no ropes in sight,
no one to help, no wings for flight,
and the prospect of a ladder
remote as the hand of God –

the question is, my dear:
have you considered
the *choices* you'll soon
have to make? –
the limitations that each will impose? –
this narrowing of your options? –
the likely depredations
on life and limb? –
and for further study (whatever
these choices might betoken
of eschatology and physics),
what of their promise of a brief ecstasy
balancing that of a long recovery, oh

shit, have you thought of all that, every bit,
thought through this, this . . . *spectacle?* . . .
this prospect of a thirty-foot drop
tingling the eyeballs
of the execrating neighbors
ringing each side of your home,
their roofs naked and visible
only to you, you with your
eagle's perspective? –

and are you of a mind
to offer these nosy clods, these pygmies,
these suburban subaltern-ish window gapers,
a vision of the unexpected,
a splattering of delight? – O

love, love, – far better – make it
a miracle of wings! –
a miracle that will muscle its way
into the Book of Miracles,
a miracle to be whispered of
all the nights and days to come,
revered in church stalls and cigar shops,
in lounges and pool halls
many seasons after you have morphed to zero
somewhere over the deep horizon.

When I dress

When I dress
my husband thinks it's for him,
and it is, as it is for myself,
and for the hours
when he holds me in his arms
and to his mouth
as though I were a sweet fruit

because, for him,
that's the juice he needs to taste,
that's what he needs
to hold fast to
in the mornings before he shaves
and leaves me
for his work that is steady and true
and, certain as the earth,
he knows that I will be home
when he comes home

but what I need to hold,
to hold fast to,
are my hours, my own,
which pass
by his eyes in dimensions
as numbered as the carpels
of an orange, though all he sees
is a single dimension, one slice,
the slice he thinks of
as his own, and does not realize
that there are other slices
and others who also see them
as edibly theirs.

The provocation

There was once a bull. A very gentle bull.
He lived in a field of flowers.

Some men came one day
and put him in the back of a truck
with slats on its sides,
and the bull pushed his nose
through the slats, he tried to breathe,
to catch the passing wind,
but the slats were tight
with little space between them,
and when the bull looked through them
all he could see were striped fields
sliding by at great speed.

The truck moved through the night
and darkness all around, all around,
and when he looked up
the bull could see the moon
and the stars, a kind of map
which meant nothing to him.

He did not understand maps or men.

The next morning the truck came to a stop,
and then some other men
who smelled of bull
guided him into a small pen.

He stood there, fenced in,
and thought about nothing,
his flowers, the sky. His large
green field. Its brightness
and its pools of shade.

But after a while
the door of the pen swung open
and he was prodded, pushed
out into a large ring,
and people all around, all
around, and noise
from every side,

and he stood there
in this circle of noise
under a sun that cared nothing for bulls,
for men, and wanted only to sit,

but then men in bright costumes
rode towards him on tall creatures,
and when they passed they jabbed his sides
and hurt him terribly. And the flowers
dissolved in front of his eyes
like rain running down
the posts of a fence.

And then a man approached on foot,
a wave of color
and motion in his hands,
and the man provoked him.
So the bull did
what any bull would do.
It was in his nature.

But the man did
what was in his nature, too.

This went on for some time,
this gamble, this dare,
this dance of two, and the air
was hot and the bull longed for the man
to cease his provocations,
for the noise to abate,
yet still this conspiracy of two,
and the bull did not understand,

but it was not for the bull to understand,
it was for the bull to rush, to turn,
to rush, to turn, to tire,

it was for the bull
to rise up in the end
into the soundless night
to become a map of stars
floating in place forever.

Line # 501: the last word

In the imaginary poem of 1,001 lines I just wrote
for and about you, I stole from Dylan Thomas
the notion of rhyming the first and last lines,
the second and penultimate, and so forth and
so on, until the last word of line # 501 stands
alone, an unrhymed orphan, abandoned and
very literally “at the end of the line” – leaving
me, I might add, at the end of my rope, sussing
out a sound that pairs with none of the others
employed amongst the 500 matched rhymes
that strut the ponderous body of the poem.

Theft has its compatriots. From Borges I swiped
the idea that it would be easier to write *about*
the poem than to undertake its actual composition,
the latter course, of necessity, forcing me to mine
once more the brilliant shales of our history,
all of that sparkling, all of that crumbling. All

so predictable. That said, though, I think it fitting
that at this point I turn the poem over to you
for line # 501, requesting a one-line summary
of what you were thinking, wringing from you
a rhyme newly in service to our common language,
a hard noise rank with disclosure, some words
I never had the privilege of hearing in real life.

When the student is ready

The teacher appears at a crook in the road.

The road is a number line, in this telling,
a zig zag that starts at zero
on a continent that has no coasts,
whose tongue thus
has no word for sea.

And the road?
Who can say where it might end?
I could a tale unfold whose lightest word
would harrow up thy soul
the teacher says.

The teacher is mild, mild and wise,
the humble glow of the pedagogue,
veined hands, age spots, the mean hair
combed over, a little dandruff.

The student?
Veined hands, age spots, the
combover, dandruff.

The teacher is oceanic.
He holds out a book
bound in leather.

The binding is convoluted
with age, its gold letters
spell out something,
Cathouse, Catharsis,
it's hard to say.

The book has harrowed
the student's shelf
forever.

[He] The voice

It came to us long after the fact,
even as oil spilled on the waters
can travel the ocean for years,
for many hundreds of nautical
miles, or rise decades later
from fathoms below.

It came from a great distance.
It was as oil upon the waters.

It came to us in the camber
of a question mark curling,
not fully formed, sinuous,
a mazy small voice
on the other end of the line
asking if he were still alive,
our father. Who was not.

The voice sought answers,
but gently, coiling amidst
hesitations, probing
not out of loathing
but a thirst, a need to know.
It had no hunger to strike.
No malice.

Yet poison
in a certain knowledge.
It spread a knowledge
we had not had.

It spread with soft intent
like a field of serous emeralds
that on an imaging screen
suggests a cancer.

It was neither welcome
nor unwelcome. It was
an apple, dropping.
An intelligence.

It gave us two plus two,
the final piece of a puzzle.
It was a summation.

[She] The poisoning

I was a pale child
I was third of three
I never made much noise

I would have been a bad bet
to arise as Destructor, but
the heart's an unlikely
demon, it grows wings
and scales and bites back
when bitten. Who

were those children
in that picture
with our father?

Why was his car
in the background
of that strange house, parked
as though it belonged there?

It was hard to piece
together. Hard, but not
impossible. A number
leads to a number, a name
to a name, it becomes
a little fugue, a weaving
of part to part, it is
contrapuntal, a litter
of faces leading
to other faces.

I shook my scales, then;
I was a percussion
a shower of knives
a glitter of edge
I was hard rain
on a tin roof, a jangle
of jewels along my sides
and two fangs growing.
And two fangs grown.

I got their number.
I had their number.

[She] The offering

I dialed their number

I was not of this world
not of the next

I was not

I was

I was a serpent
risen

not *like* a snake, not
mere, not *like*, nor a *notion*
of snake, I was a real snake
rounding upon their rug,
curled in their bed, nesting
in an impossible place.
Yet I did not wish to bite.

My voice slithered
with the fluid contours
of love, a message different
from that of the scriptural
serpent, so full of itself,
from the imperial snake
in its emerald glory, the cheap
thrill of the killing snake.

I did not want to kill.
I was not death. I was
The Destructor shambling,
offering a broken tablet
to my brothers and sisters.
Holding it out like a fruit.

My voice had been as oil
upon the waters, without
substance, a diminishment,
atomized, yet it offered
the fluid contours of life,
of a life – its bits, its pieces
reconstituted.
The fluid contours
of love, conjoined.

[He] The uncoupling

We could not unjoin
what the voice knew
from what it should not
have known, nor
what we knew.

It sounded familiar.
It sounded like us. Our sound,
our voices, atomized.

It chased us to old drawers
filled with sparkling things,
bits of cloth, a notebook
with cryptic markings. In
his hand, his deliberate
hand. It chased us
to two photographs
that had never
made any sense
to us.

The voice was frame-wrecking,
a discourse on love, a study
in perspective. It took us
to the edge, it bent us
over, it forced us to look.
It was mathematics
made pure, and ethics,
and history, and a knife
to the episteme, it was
physics summed in
mirrors, mirrors in space
turned back to reflect
upon us, lumens
shifting across space

now settled on our small ball
of emerald and blue.
A fat lie, a fat truth:

a summation, finally,
of the known and
the knowable.

Stardust

A man with a white beard rises from his seat when his name
is called, and approaches the podium with a box under
his arm. He sets the box on the podium and tilts the mike
so that he can speak into it as he addresses the audience.

He speaks:

You have all gathered at this hour to hear a few words
and to celebrate those words in the company of others
who share your interests. Some of you have come
to read, some to listen, some have come as friends
of the moderators because it is a pleasant gesture,
and besides, a couple of hours of poetry never killed
anyone. Put them to sleep, maybe, but never killed them.

Now, we're all of us humans, and to be human is to possess
curiosity. It has driven us to explore the depths of the sea
and to peer through the Hubble telescope at the redshift
of the galaxies. We seek our beginnings. We're curious.
So it's only natural that you're wondering what might be
simmering in this box. Is it something fashioned by nature?
By man? Animal? Vegetable? Mineral? Is it an abstraction,
you might ask, a theory of history, an obscure philosophy?
Or is there nothing at all in the thing? Is the box a quantum
nod to Dr. Schrödinger? His cat? Is it the very thing that
each of us needs to think outside of? Is the name Pandora
etched on top? Or might it be a metaphor for something?

In fact, might it be filled with metaphors? Synecdoche?
With onomatopoeia? Slant rhymes? Is it brash? Shy?
Is it so shy that it stutters, and might that stutter be taken
by the learned among us for alliteration? Does it enjamb
for the sheer pleasure of it? Personify? If you put your ear
to it, can you detect a galloping meter? Does it engage,
as all good mysteries must, in just a touch of hyperbole?

Whatever we have here, it's made of stardust, as are we all.
The Hubble has shared the science with us. Pried off the top.
Humans, pine cones, soup cans. All made of stardust. Yet
the Hubble is just a humble machine, a sweet jumble of
mirrors and gears. A contraption fashioned to peer without.
We're built a little differently. For us, the job's to peer within.

What I have done with my life

There are other things
I could have done
with these rare and only hours.

I might have taught the intricacies
of the forehead. Wandered
the clotted range of physics.
Numismatics. Lost myself
in 1776. 1963. I might have
splashed through the puddles
of other tongues just to see the mud
swirl around my mind in Medellín,
in Dubai. I might have made
a rich man smile as he looked
at his notions transmuted to lines
and arcs; taken some pleasure
in beguiling the seasons
with porticoes and gardens,
exploring how they might empty
into each other like madeira
flowing from flask to glass.
But to enter one door
is to close another.

I have gathered some leaves
and carried them into the fields
and I have said Look at these
oddments, these many hues, listen
to their music as they lift off
into the wind. And the wind
has carried them to places
I cannot name. I have made
choices that will never find
their way into marble, have
opted for something softer,
more mutable. I have flown
through a thicket of angels
and I am dripping with light.

Gratitude

I give thanks for my patient teachers,
most especially as I was a deceiver:
bright-eyed and receptive at a glance,
a decent learner yet a terrible student.
Quick on the things that did not matter
and molasses on the things that did.

I apologize for never summoning
quite the number of horses I should have,
and say only by way of feeble defense
that I think I never had the horsepower
they thought I had. Or surely never learned
to marshal it. I give thanks
for the bitter wafer of self-knowledge.

I give thanks for the women
who put up with me for as long as they did.
If the great scales of justice were adjusted
to measure long-sighted and short,
my short would thud
on the wood like lead.

I give thanks for being one link
in a chain. My grandfathers were nearly
indentured. I give thanks for my children,
thanks that they will never live in chains.

I give thanks for the days
that have floated off like pages
ripped from a calendar
in an old movie, just a corny way
to denote the passage of time.

Yet give thanks for that passage.
For those many days, months, years.
And thanks, as well, for
the hours left. For whatever there be
at the end of the pier.

I've had enough: *sisu*

Thank you for sitting around this bed
chatting gently about nothing, thank
you for watching me half-close the door
when I go to pee, thank you for trying
not to listen to that feeble stream.

Thank you for being the solemn bright
balloons tied to my fingers, each of you,
and each of you about to go scudding
up into the ceiling when the knots are
loosened. Which is, I suspect, not so
much a moment as a process of floating.
If we're lucky, not so brutal as some.

Thank you for helping me into and out
of this fine contraption they've installed
in what is still vaguely my bedroom,
this wondrous up & down hard & soft
mattress that breathes, that saves my final
skin from the further indignity of sores,
so thank you System for this loan that
coddles me like a mother. Thank you.
Thank you for the many small comforts.

I've had enough. I mean it in the Finnish
sense, *sisu*, and it's worth looking up
if you have a sec. I'm trying to say that
somehow in the end it all seems sufficient
to me – if not a horn of plenty, then surely
an armful of enough. Settled. Content.

I am happy to be here. I'm not saying
this to give you comfort. I'm saying it
in tenses past and present. Have been
happy, grateful, and very happy now.

I apologize for my stolid stupidities.
You have been kind to me, mostly, and
when you have stumbled here and there,
the only harm is that you've reminded me
of my own stumbles, more destructive,
more dramatic, more shambolic. But
thank you, you seem to have forgiven,
and all that's past now seems nothing
much, just a pleasant pebbled prologue
leading from some leaf-filtered sunlight
into a depth of trees and a sluice
of unmenacing shadow. My mother
taught me about humor at this far reach
of radiant desolation. My father, grit, will,
the gift of seemly, rational resignation.

I hope you will be gentle thus when,
my first, my last, my deepest loves,
you think of me. Whatever I shall
be thinking then – nothing, I suspect,
just a number line limned with zeroes
going to a slow fade, then a theatrical
black – I cannot say. But perhaps,
against all odds, and very much to my
surprise, I'll wake to a rest of the story.