

PART FIVE  JUST PURÉE THE GRUEL

What it is like

Here is a little poem
set amidst its raucous
brothers and sisters.

If you turn the page
too fast, you might
miss it.

When the other poems
raise their hands
it says nothing.

When they howl
for food it is silent.

When they bray
about paying
their taxes
it looks down
at its laces.

It is like
the frog by our
quiet pond. Glistening,
bright as a crayon.
Still as a rock.

Have I ever longed
with such precision?

Poetry lesson

I am teaching Catie
how to express herself
in various writing styles.

I've explained that styles
are like clothing:
what works one day
might not work the next.

This morning I taught her
about poetry. Then
she taught me.

She taught me how a lamb
is just a cloud with legs.

Fruit of my eye

I think of an apple.

I type the word, *apple*,
and it appears in letters
on a screen, on a page.

So what we have up there
is a clutch of five letters
set in twelve point
Didot Italic, lower case.

This is not an apple.

But your eyes
see the letters,
your mind
goes to work, and
late or soon *ta da!*,
the letters form a picture,
an image, made
just for you
by, partly, you
and, partly, me.

Make no mistake, sugar,
we need, always,
to surprise each other.

As for the image,
the details, it could be
a crisp green Granny Smith
with, close to the top,
two small brown holes

or a heavy drop
of red, red sin

or a buttery moon
set atop a basket,
lording it over
the kiwi and pears

(that's your say)

but still: an apple

(that's mine).

That's my small privilege,
my show of arms, the art
of the conjurer. For
example: now
I am typing
the word
sea.

The spaces between the keys

There's no joy between S and D.
Down there in the trenches
whole lives bloom and wither
beneath our fingertips.

It's nothing like the moats of stillness
surrounding the notes in a score,
it's nothing so profound
though there is, at times,
the promise of some action
with V and B squatting at the gates.

A plaything links T and Y.
Camelot shines through J and K.
Hard to see between F and G,
fog, fag, it all spells smoke, and
jail time in the small dark aisle
connecting avenues K and L.

Sandwiched between
the 5 and the 6 lives one last
little piggy, the porker that no
one ever remembers to count,
too wise to leave home
just happy to be on top, often
lunching with me these days,
content with a few crumbs,
talking big, talking percentages,
exposing, as I sit and eat,
an attitude about this world
skewed slightly to the left.

Oh, and who's that now
staring up at me as though
I were the face in the heavens,
what centrist agape
amidst the Y and the U?

The civilization of the tongue

The animal of language.

It has moved inside me for as long
as I can recall. It was small
when I was small. And grew
a tongue upon my tongue, so that
my tongue, which might have played
crucible to Mandarin or Greek,
just a dumb jibber waiting to learn
the sound of itself, learned, and
what it learned was American English.

And how it bathes in the bell
of the mouth, this tongue, now
cursing its mates, now a porpoise
rolling in a tank, just as civil
as the moment calls for and no
more, it cannot bear restraint
for long, it can bear nothing more
than I can bear, not one iota more.

How the tongue cracks its whip
over the lion of the muscle,
the bright owl of the brain,
there is a whole menagerie
it trumpets and defines:
the stolid mule of the heart,
the insect of the eyelid,
the snake of the sex,
the humble, plated turtle
of the mouth, its hard palate,
its soft platen, its home,
and how it strives to play saint
and philosopher, policeman,
politician, the one who would
civilize that living zoo. The one
who would set out on the tiny legs
of my fingers to conquer
that rapacious monster standing
with one foot in the Abbey
and the other in plain Westminster.

When you think words

think bullets. Think Benya Krik. Best not to ignore
Alphonse Capone, Vito Andolini Corleone. A Chosen
One, the subject standing guard in guttering light
firing at a leaf mold, the breaking of a stick. Bless
the simple sinew of the verb, the call to action. Spikes.

Call them cockles, cobblestones, cooch or coriander.
Call them prayer, predicate, spell. Those, or Revelation.
Cast them in terms of Byzantium, Sumer, the Whore
of Babylon. You might even try to cast them out
for the blight they've grown to be upon your page
just see where that gets you. Me? I've made
my peace. Now you must make your own.

You must make your own poem and fill it
with all the perfume you can dredge from the language.
Like a small cup of spermaceti drawn from the head
of a whale, these words await you, you must dip
into the lexicon and drench yourself in all this beauty

lace your lines with acacia and oleander, the bright tang
of frangipani and chamomile, the aroma of jasmine.
Your fingers must drip with anise and coriander. Blood
cockle, dog cockle, mussel, whelk, your fingers must stink
with the furzy cooch of words. When they arrive in force
you'll know it. Esteem these ten horns of the Beast,
then creature no more their carriage than winged shoe
simple sandal. Sit, cleave to whatever you can. If you
know sin, join in. Ring with breaking crystal, sing, fly
from your tower bowl, bard, bat. Reflect on that.

Reflect on the bosom of words, and how it heaves.
Shower the cobblestones below. Reflect on how
it is you lean now into the grim chair, the failing light,
to learn about the gold cup in my hand, full up
with abominations scratched across the face. Gossip,
shame, crime, disgrace play, bet, call, trump
haruspex, sibyl, magus, enchanter: I said, reflect on
the bosom of words. How it heaves. A brace of leaves.

The night that I met Annie

It was just outside
the doors of this
public reading room.

They were the public
and I was the reader.

There was a sign,
it said Free Reading.
What a concept.
Free verse.

She came up to me
and she was shy
and asked if it
were really free.

And I said yes,
yes, I guess it is,
in a sense but
in another, well,
little girl, you
have no idea
how much
it could cost.

I might, she said.
I might have
some idea.
But how about
you? Do you
have an idea
of just how much
it might be worth?

I don't think
she was
twenty yet.

Baby, I said,
who d'ya think
yer talkin' to?

She guessed
that I was
the reader
that night.

She thought
that I was
someone.

The scourges of normalcy

To have had a tender mother,
a father who did not raise his hand, these
are not the foundations for chasing whales
or setting forth from Troy.

Good to know the tree
from which you've fallen. Good to know
you haven't rolled off the hill.

But not so good for the narrative impulse.

Not so good for the narrator.

No gift to recognize
the oceans of the ordinary
pushing their salt tides
though your veins.

These are the scourges of normalcy.
I have so little to confess.
Confuse.
Conceal.
Concede.

Ach, du.

Where is that urgency
that pitches me into the inkwell
to both unbutton and enact the past?

So what do you do? he asked

For money or love? I replied.
He surprised me: For love.
For love, I said, I write poems.
For love, he said, I shoot birds.

I get up early, I said, for love.
I get up early, he said, for love.
I sit for hours and nothing happens
we each said at the same time.

He looked down into his drink.
I'm sick of shooting birds, he said.
I looked down into my drink.
I hear that, friend, I answered.

Poem

It's hard when you finally reach this stage.
You haven't a thing to say anymore.
You should have been born without a tongue.

Whatever you say's been said before.
The world's a book with just one page.
Letters and pictures as bleak as the sun.

No one cares what you have to say.
It just doesn't speak to anyone.
Whatever you say is such a bore.

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It just doesn't speak to anyone.
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The last poem I'll ever write

I suspect it might be rolling
somewhere off the watery horizons
of Polynesia, normally a stretch
for an East Coaster like me,
but not so very far this morning,
sitting as I am in a Maui backyard
over the remains of eggs and juice and toast
with the coffee table of the Pacific
spread open before me.

And, thinking about it pressing my finger
over a final few crumbs,
lifting them from my plate
perhaps that poem
is farther out still. From
the shade of this lanai
I imagine it cresting
beyond the curve of the earth.

I fancy it feeding
on whatever swims out there, fishes
like small words building to
an elegy or an epithalamium
in the silvery plenum of its belly.
I can feel it. I know it's there.

The other thing I know is that this yard,
this splendid instance in space,
home to spotted dove and cattle egret,
is subject to a celestial egg timer,
ours for just three days, no more,
one Friday one Saturday one Sunday
left to enjoy this little Kihei bungalow
which backs onto a moment
of startling green declining
into the hourglass blues
of the unmade sea.

Well, soon enough this will be over.
You've been on vacation.
You know the drill.

Soon enough I will be sitting
on the tarmac, sitting
in the narrow belly of an airplane
scrunched between my drowsing wife
and an improbably large man
with blighting breath, and I will crane
to assess the calves of the stewardesses
pushing sodas and ice
down the long aisles of their careers.

My ambitions will be no larger
than snacks perhaps an extra
bag of peanuts, if I ask
in a soft hungry voice.
At which point I'll be deep in pine
for the Pacific breeze and the birds
and the painterly grasses.

I will recall
as though it were just hours ago
how the lawn gave itself over without reserve
to a casual strip of shifting sand
and (if memory serves) to these
several shameless postcard palms
which interpose themselves
like island girls
between my borrowed porch
and the appalling power and beauty
of the breaking waters.

Perhaps by then
I will have flown over the last poem
without my even knowing it, the way
we fly past the anniversaries of our own deaths
each year. Calm. Resigned. Oblivious.

PART SIX  PIANNY ROLL BLUES

When it got too cold

we set the albums on fire. There were
rows of them, chipped and yellow, all the pictures
our parents had left us, forgotten aunts,
colicky infants. Atlantic City afternoons
when you'd go there for the boardwalk, the piers,
some sand in your bucket, the taffy.

The albums weren't enough.
When it got colder still
we set the neighbors on fire. All of those burgers
they'd scarfed at our barbecues, they made
a lovely light, a sexy sizzle
of fat and bone.

The neighbors weren't enough.
When it got colder still
we set the city on fire. If there had been newsmen left,
or newsladies, how they'd have stood the cold
to report in earnest on our doings,
and back to you, Al. Always
back to you.

The city was enough, really, it was,
but we were having too much fun by then.
After your first kill, after you've watched your soul
crinkle to smoke, what does it matter?
This is the bargain the sniper must make,
the crooked accountant, the lying spouse.

When it got colder still
we set each other on fire. We started at the toes
to increase the effect. The flames crawled up our boots
and settled in our hair. What fun we'd have had
watching each other burn, but we were busy just then
flapping in the snow and wind, making angels,
stamping out the angels.

Bloody cat

Thou canst see everything we do,
in the night and day, in the day and night,
everything, everything . . . O God, mun,
you're like a bloody cat.

DYLAN THOMAS

. . . these voluptuous clouds,
like the sofas of the saints.

GAVIN PRETOR-PINNEY

Is god a voluptuary, rounding everything in sight,
the sun, the edges of time, the clouds, fitting everything
to the small of his back?

Does his back cry out from his labors?

On overcast days is he unhappy? is winter just a mood,
does god sulk through the clouds in galoshes, snow
all over his rubber soles? Do angels brush it off?

Did he make the saints to sweat the small stuff?

With so many toys at hand, does he ever get lonely?
Does he sip at espresso, set up a daily klatch?
Does he yearn for a little table talk?

Did he make the saints to keep him company?

Is sainthood political? Do they vie for the seat
closest to him, engage in vicious backstabs,
numberless sullies in lieu of harps and cherubs?

Did he make numbers that we might sense the divine?

Does he peer into the fishbowls of our windows
as if we were prime time fodder? Does he hear
without listening, see without looking?

Were we really made in his image? Or hers?

What sort of genitalia did he fashion for himself?
What use would he have for sex, for urination,
who can spin galaxies out of a sneeze . . .

. . . and how shall we refer to him? Does he care?

He is no more convincing than *She*.
Pronouns are just a convenience. A convenience
for little binary apes. The way they reason.

A man and his son, fishing

I sat with them a while
and watched the sun break
to slabs of glass
on the hard surface
of Wilde Lake.
No one talked much.

Then a trout hit the son's line,
the air darkened with ten
thousand years, the line tightened
and gave, tightened and gave

and the old man talked him
through it, *Reel hard now, boy!*,
and the boy reeled hard

*Now lay up, son, give in
to the will of the water,
let the fish do the work,*
and they brought her up, together

a speckled beauty with ribbons
of pink setting on each horizon,

and then she was on the dock,
and the sun hard, the water
flying, and the man held the fish
like a lying child over one knee

and pulled with everything in him
but nothing gave. Again he pulled,
again, and again then
everything gave all at once

everything in the fish
came out with the line, the wicked
gizzard and sundered guts of the fish
came out through her living mouth
on the sharp fangs of the hook,
and the fish grunted and hissed
(though I am told
this does not happen)

and it was an honorable affair,
an honorable ritual, timeless,
an honorable death, though this
is a learned thing, this honor.

"Fall Risk"

Sager, Bruce DOB: 11/7/51 Male
SINAI HOSPITAL

If poetry's economy of force,
this two-word
yellow wrist tag
rivals *Hamlet*.

"FALL RISK?"
Tut tut. 'Tis but
the quarter of it, nursie.
I'm a gamble for all seasons.

Though I do love
a spiral,
a plummet,
a quick descent.

Ask my doctor.
Or any of my wives.
Or my autumnal mortal soul.

The night after his father died

Tonight my friend Michael has called
to ask me to go out drinking with him,
that we might forget the world.

On the way to the club
we roll back the rag top
to let the moon wash us with light.

The stars look down upon
our headlights, two slow torches
crawling the spine of the road.

And later we listen to music and sit
with girls and drink, and drink, and
when we piss we piss a river of stars.

No longer husbands, fathers,
sons, serfs, proles now we are
kings. Drumstick brandishers.

A man can become uncoupled
from the public parts of himself
by his enchantments. Easy division.

We have divided the light from
the darkness, we have divided
the waters from the waters.

We have driven the clouds to their beds.
We have become the firmament.
We have forgotten the world.

Angels tire

Angels must tire, too,
of the gossip we call
history, of the quarrels
we call philosophy, of the cards
and crystals and candles
we call on to explain
the numbers we live by,
of the rapes we bury,
even as they must tire
on occasion of this entire
small blue scheming marble.

**You are as ready
as you have ever been**

It doesn't matter if you strip
to bone or stand in aegis
of quibble and complaint.

It doesn't help to think
of your parents' faces,
or your children's.

It doesn't help to ask questions.
What would you even
want to ask?

What language
would please its ear?

The crest of the firebird

I held her hand, it was translucent
and waxy as oiled paper, papery
because it comes on in stages,
a thinning, and then more
thinning

and the wax begins
to form at the end.

The body knows
the loosening of its cordage

it knows before the nurses
who know best
next to the body itself

and they can tell you
they have sat by the hips
and knuckles and the spine
of dying and they have seen
the body packing its cases

they have seen the great rush
of feathers and the soul banging
itself against the window
in fury

and they have seen
the body hanging back
so softly

this child astonished
at the lip of the pyre

For George Rourke

Cremated in his 32nd year / heroin

Here, within this shapely stone
In his chamber all alone
Lies friend George, who long pursued
Varieties of solitude.

In one less strong, nor yet so young
Such hermitage were lightly won.
In such a one as this the trash
Of decades sifts as light as ash.

He chased a vision that he might
Denude her postures all the night;
What he proposed to kiss and quit
Propounded just the opposite.

Life's a meal, and long, and sweet,
And we resolve to what we eat.
Such sleep as settled in his veins
Is long departed. Yet remains.

For Jeannie Vogel

And Jeannie's day began like any day, but early,
because she was a baker, and bakers begin before the sun.

I never tasted anything she baked, but if she was as good
at baking as at delivering babies, then sugar in her hands

was nectar. Why did she leave the maternity ward
to put on the apron? It was her dream, my wife tells me,

between sobs, holding her cell phone in her hand
with the local story glowing up at her like hellfire.

Hellfire. The semi that hit the baker's little truck on 27
burst into flames, and Jeannie's body was so burned

that not even god could say what they pulled from her cab.
But what she pulled from my wife in the difficult hour

of her delivery lives on, sweeter than any pastry,
eight now, oblivious to cookies, crashes, what goes on.

What I kept

I left grade school and I kept a picture of the Miss America man
Bert Parks squatting next to me in the school yard,
he was wearing the mask of minor celebrity, I was
wearing rabbit ears and a dab of paint on the tip
of my nose, I kept a notion of the absurd and a vague
recollection of the weather the day absurdity came

I left high school and I kept a packet of Algebra tests that all say
“100” across the top, I kept the nausea of existential decay
and a library copy of Roget, I kept a yearbook with a roadmap
to my failures, their long Sixties hair and their brilliant eyes

Father died and I kept the Zeiss binoculars and his colored ribbons
from the war, I kept his undersized golf jacket that would
fit if only I lost a little weight, I kept the scar on my
fourth finger from my experiment with his band saw
and I kept my sense of humor he never had a band saw

Mother died and I kept the two spooky porcelain miniatures
she played with back in the Twenties when she was a girl,
the world was roaring and she was playing with dolls,
and when people ask me why I have dolls in my office
sometimes I walk to the shelves and hand them over
with caution, warning about the fragility of their limbs

The basement flooded and I kept the mildew in the corners
and the damp stains running around the walls, I kept
a box or two of poems that were no good and now stick
together like men smoking outside an employment office,
I kept all the ideas I could scrape from those boxes
and I kept some scraps of paper from the repairs,
here, I said to my wife, these are receipts, keep 'em,
I kept all of nature's wet palette when it marches
on a home, I kept up with the Joneses when I could

I kept out of trouble unless, as happens, trouble came calling
and often I managed to keep the peace, though
trust me, the peace can be hard to keep, I kept
my cool in the coals of battle, I kept the spoils
of soft surrender, I kept my head when others lost theirs,
and mostly I kept my job, mostly, but not always,
for a job can be shrill, the wolf of your years, a job
can be an ungrateful mistress, often not worth the keeping

I kept the change but lost the dollars, kept a plant until I killed it,
I kept a woman and then another, I kept a secret
for almost an hour, I kept in line, I kept good time,
I kept the rhythm but lost the line, the music was lost
in the sweep of the hours, the music was lost in the Sabbath
burning, but somehow I managed to keep my balance

I kept my shoulder to the wheel, I kept my word when I learned
to keep it, I kept a count of the things I'd broken
and of all the things that had broken in me, though
really, it's not a list worth keeping, one day I think
I tossed it away memory's short, it's hard to say

I kept the hole in my insides where my body once squeezed out
its awful juices, I kept the acid brush of time and painted
my face year in, year out, I kept bad company and good,
but mostly I kept to myself and counted the seasons

I kept the tense of the inner child, I kept the wherefores
but lost the wiles, and now I keep a glass by my bed
each morning I look at the rings it's made, ring upon
ring in the shine of the sun, it minds me keep my eye
on the clock, the casual way the second hand
sweeps, I reckon the seconds one by one,
I keep the end in sight, the end always keeps

Evening song

*Batter my heart, three-person'd God, for you
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend
Your force to break, blow, burn and make me new.*

DONNE (HOLY SONNET XIV)

Ah Nameless, Dear Ebb & Flow, Sweet Show & Tell,
repent me this ecstasy of skin, this thorn in the deeper bone.
If your smile's wide as the moon and the sun, then I
am less than a blister upon it; dross to dross, must to must,
relax that rage yet goading this skeleton. What am I
but the little lamb? Who made me, Ma'am, who made me?
Keep me from the haruspices, Sir, save me as a skybald.

*If I come to you, O Profit & Loss,
back high and dressed in a tired fashion,
my suit a hundred years beyond the season,
do keep in mind that ten decades and more
are rather less than a tick to you, that
you see with your ears as well as your eyes –
consider our stated positions, then,
and flatter me for the starch in my shirts,
the hours of polish upon my spats,
the precision with which I've doggedly fashioned
my cuffs, my collar and my cravat.*

Calcify, clot and crack; not timid, not deferential, but
deal as a living father must with the keen of a selfish child
who divines, at last, the sissy in his spoils, whose wail
depends from the set of Empire chairs, the champlévé,
the future repaying his gaze in the fuss of noon
as a hissing off the pawn shop's sleepy windows;

*O Nameless, again, forgive this exhausted diction!
The language is pooped save the hand of an unborn poet.
Words serve to scar the hide of sentiment,
to mar it past all recognition, blotched, blobbed,
blotted and scorched, bowed as an antique crone
and gussied like a lemon from Earl Scheib;
my Bic is drear, my dick is drab, the very
essence of a scab, dry as a dead goose feather.
Deliquesced & over & out. Our Father
who art, our Momma who ain't, it's a One-Note Duo
won't slip their son a Jackson now and then.*

desiccate the frail organs cankering this, thy jubilation,
this din which buffets the burgher's gains to each cranny
of the village; slice down through the primal rhythms
as a serpent à la Galvani, a cable and chain anachronism,
the spoil of the daunse, the wolf in tango with the maid,
the baldachined corsets of the groom and the groom
all night, and all day long, keeping an eye on the nanny.

*So now perhaps do you get it, Daddy-o?
A drop of down to go with my elation.
Words tamp the earnest supplicant, block
his stride but ten lengths from the ribbon.
The rocks shift as you hop about the stream.
Wilderness grows around the machete's blade
even as its metal cleaves the air. The whole deal's
screwed beyond repair. You've stolen the ticket
and torn up the map to the station.*

Shatter this ear and nose, this eye and tongue
as a glass will ring beneath the uncallused foot
of some jaded stuffed shirt-to-come; and grind it, down
and deep and dear, grind it into the spindrift soot
all sullied and galed with fathers let the furies rip
with a chaste connubial kiss. Bend to my withers,
I'll bend at the knee, commend us all with a whip
and a word to the walloping wind; make featureless,
Nameless, the face and fortune of the bride, her
snaggled incisors after a time failing her smile,
her silver halides buried back by the dollar bin
where forebears in albums fade beyond their names;
make high and operable only this yearn of a pity
pivoting on its wing, baffled, droll, an angel stalled,
an airship dropped to one knee over the city . . .

Sputtering, a deadly dull machine . . . ?

Oh yes indeed!, plotting, from its spirals in the blue,
a twisted path to the port of the sun, its disobliging
poleis, and then come all the way back down, down
past the daily moorings, the strange and peopled
harrowing dark, down past the rilled upanishads,
the ripple of the wolfish wave, down
to the mouth of this blazing harbor
where babies burn in freefall
and go flying over the flaming edge
and all fire and water couple
with the cockle of the air, and the tide
denudes the nippers to their toes.

Dear god, that was a good one! I'll kill my smirk, I'll scotch my glee.

Dark sweet solid soggy bone of sulk,
madre, match and maker of all begins,
strophe's echo upon the end, stern patron,
padre, stream of dawn, patience, stillness,
matrix, muse, O model, master, minstrel
of gibber and blot, iron jiber, lutanist of not,
your canter through the sentence of our squall
is but the press of verb on noun, so easy, easy,
O unpronounced, O lissome ichor, O barnacled loom,
straightaway shake this weft to its fractured valence,
and for these bounties, these wry thanks: *reductio, renovatio.*
Now come, come to me, Silence. Come. Make me small.

**Pianny roll blues,
I danced holes in my shoes**

*and for these bounties,
these wry thanks:
reductio, renovatio*

ME

I would like to thank
no one. Nobody helped.
I am here today because of
me. Of my own accord,
a nation of one, of the people,
by the people, and by God
for the bloody people
of that little island
that no man is.

I would like to thank The Academy
but I never heard from them.
I would like to thank My Parents
but they never heard from me
and now it's a little late: I'm not sure
they would even recognize my voice.

I would like also
to thank the mayor (me)
and the governor (me) and the
squidgy little pasha sitting
up there on the hill whom
in my capacity as chief dispenser
of names I now name Emperor
of the Hill. Which would be
myself and no other. There warn't
another other way to be.

Is this the place where I acknowledge
my editor and my proofreader?
All mistakes are theirs and theirs alone.

I would like to thank God
that I am an agnostic.
And if you have a problem with that,
then go petition the District Judge.

Go see who's sitting on that bench.

The end

This is the way it will end,
the sun will go out. If ice
can shiver, it will shiver.

This is the way it will end,
alone, and a few people
will care, and it won't matter,
your body will become
a hand of solitaire

even with your children
at your feet, even with
your red-eyed wife
clinging to your hands
like two balloons.

This is the way it will end,
the book will be closed
and the words forgotten.