



SKY REPAIR

**POEMS BY
MIKE FINLEY**

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Haircut¹

When my stepdad was dying of a brain tumor,
we hired a barber named Dave to come round every week.
Dick didn't have a hair on his head,
after chemo, not one – but he liked talking to Dave,
who also sold insurance and awnings.
Dave would pretend to cut hair
for half an hour or more, chatting about
the kids today, or an open lot
where a supermarket might go.
And Dick would nod, or grunt –
he had no words left in him – with half open eyes.
I think he was pleased to be served,
to be the man, that ghost hair was still coming
out of him, unstoppable, wild.
When Dave was done he carefully brushed the excess off,
shook the cloth off on the porch,
let nothing ride away on air.

¹ Horses Work Hard (2000)

In the Hot Springs Parking Lot²

They move in slow, small steps across the blacktop,
Three sisters in their sixties of indeterminate accent,
Perhaps Czech-Canadian, advancing toward their car.
Their feet are small but their legs and arms are plump,
Made tender by the waters, their heads tilt
As if vital news has just been imparted,
That may relate to a loved one, a daughter or niece
Whose future hangs in the balance of what each
Has felt for years but only now is sharing.
They have been soaking in sulfur springs the past hour,
At the treeless foot of a mountain of slag,
Aqua playing on their smooth pink faces,
When some wisdom began to form between them
And now they move toward separate cars and farewell
I would like to greet them, to honor them
Because beauty rushing out of their pores
And pausing in this purposeful moment.

² Horses Work Hard (2000)

The Important Thing^{3*}

The hand inside my ribs is done tickling me, good.
Lately it's taken to tapping out rhythm on bones.
"When will I see you again?" "You won't."

It's the hottest day of my life, and the brightest.
In a higher country somewhere else
the kites are at it again, swooping
over meadows and hills.
Its children never scrape themselves.
Miles from a mother, they never need bandages.

Here my mailbox is fuller than I wish.
"It's over. Repeat. It's over. It's over."
I read on. "Now it's time to be happy. Be happy."

The call comes late at night, you descend,
one hand on the banister.
Go ahead, I tell you, tug at your clothes.
Your mother is gibbering herself all away,
the generations wash together when she talks.
Don't worry, you say, she can live for years like this.

The beer sits still in my stomach.
The hand inside starts tightening.
It shivers to a clench.

³ The Movie Under the Blindfold (1978)

* I had a hard time deciding whether to include this poem. It typifies what I was about in 1977 – writing horror-dreams about something happening, something unclear. I felt I was morphing into the Stephen King of free verse, hung up on darkness. On the plus side, I believe I was experiencing something darkly prophetic. When the by who cries wolf really sees wolves, what is he to do? And, I like the writing, which strikes me as icy and unrelenting.

It's Over ^{4*}

This is the end of everything so far.
Here is the beginning of everything else.
Two days ago we were in love like fire.
Now we are worrying again.

This is the end of all up to now,
This is the start all whatever is left.
The end and beginning of life on earth.

We take turns drawing the dotted line between us
Like a long fuse, and our life together
Spits like the wayward snake.

Sometimes I want to let it go,
Twist lid,
Watch it shoot from the can.

I want to see if the fire we feed
Would go out by itself,
Or if we'd panic
And reach for wood.

⁴ The Movie Under the Blindfold (1978)

* I was a young guy, studying the relationships I was in. In this one, I knew it was not going anywhere. But I was passive and unable to break it off myself. Eventually, though, I did. No 60s philosophy strikes me as quite as putrid as 'Love the one you're with.' Better to get to work and find the one you are supposed to be with.

From the Roof of My Apartment Building in Downtown Minneapolis⁵

the moon is down to the cuticle now
the stars nod in and out

the night is as dark
and as deep as the hole

in the shed of the potato farm
in Michigan that my grandfather Mulligan

had, and
then lost

⁵ Borrowing from Minneapolis (To Pay St. Paul), 1980

Lullabye^{6*}

Rest your drowsy cheek,
My girl, quiet on my
Prickling arm. Dream
Your dream of lapping
Waters cresting on this
Human form. The tides
Are breathing, you and
I, in your small clench
And my tight heart.
Tonight we fill the
Grave with stones and
Slumber in the summer's
Dew. And all I make
Are promises which can
Not come true. I will
Not give you away, my
Girl, I will never make
You cry, nor morning
Find us far apart, nor
This hand gone away
From you.

⁶ Water Hills (1985)

* This poem takes its title and first two lines from the famous poem by Auden. I wrote it the first month of Daniele's life. The idea was that, no matter how much I pledged my love and devotion, I could not protect her from her own life.

Bottlework

Pick up one and tilt it in
Let it drizzle down the chin

Feel the acid in your mind
And the shiver up your spine

Feel the essence hit the stream
Feel the numbness in the brain

You are squeezed out of your skin
And issued new instructions

Like a cosmonaut out on a tether
You are becoming untogether

The heart trying in every way
To break free from the ribs of its cage

You can almost take it in your hands
And hold it against you like a lamb

Don't construct a coherent answer
That sentence must be said aslur.

Lie on the bed and watch the ceiling
Spin like a sky that is all possibility.

Dead Cat for Ray⁷

I entered a barn on an abandoned farm
in the town of Kinbrae where I lived.
In a manger on a bed of old straw I found a cat,
very dead, very thin, no fur, its leather skin stretched taut
around it.

Its back was arched in a defensive posture,
its face pulled wide in a final hiss,
and in its mummified condition you could distinguish
each vertebra and tooth.

I believe it had a heart attack and died defending itself,
perhaps against a German shepherd or raccoon.
The attacker slunk away, leaving the cat a mummy of life and
death.

When my friend Ray came to visit the farm
I took him for a tour of things I had seen –
the grave of Suicide Minnie,
the sandpaper leaf of the lamb's-ear plant,
finally to the manger in the Sveringen barn,
and we stared at the cat like reverent bad boys
then walked home.

That night we lay down in the township road
and watched the aurora shift and split in the northern sky.

Ray was from Cambridge, a city guy, gay, into *est*,
a sculptor, painter, performance artist.
He flew back home the following day,
and I did not hear from him for two years,
when he invited me to read a poem at an exhibit of his.
The art was stupendous, torsos in charcoal, roughcut wood,
hairy ropes, chains.
Ray couldn't draw his way out of a bag,
but he had something else, a ferocious vigor that moved me.
At the heart of the installation he had suspended
on an invisible line
the dead cat from Sveringen's barn, and it turned slowly
in the warm air of the gallery,

⁷ Sunset Lake (1989)

whiskers stiff, eyes black, teeth bared to the ear.

It was like, the height of bad taste to exhibit a dead creature as art, and yet everyone who saw was overwhelmed at the brave agony of the cat.

In a gallery that had seen plenty of bad ideas and wrongheaded impulses

here was life and death hanging in a haze,
it was more than noteworthy, it was serious.

A part of me resented that Ray had stolen back in the night and taken my holy treasure from me,
the other part gratified he thought it so powerful that he packed the dead animal in his dufflebag and drove from Minnesota to Massachusetts with it in the back seat. And astonished to see it now, in its current setting, twisting in the light.

Afterward I lost track of Ray. We had been friends since college,

him always private, a dog-eared copy of *The Drunken Boat* by his bed.

His scoliosis was so bad he spent a summer walking through Europe with a backpack full of rocks to straighten himself up.

Once I went to his room to listen to Highway 61 Revisited and came upon his diary and read a few pages, and I felt so ashamed of myself I started a diary of my own, in which I talked about looking at his diary.

In January I quit college and itched to Boston and spent a month in an apartment 20 inches from the El tunnel.

Every 20 minutes the train passed near, but my friends and I were so high we thought it was charming when the milk vibrated in the refrigerator.

I took him to the Tea Party and the Velvet Underground was playing

and we lay on our backs in a psilocybin haze and watched the ballroom dissolve.

Back at college Ray began joking that he was Jesus,

and then as time passed, it wasn't so much of a joke anymore.
Without a smile he turned in a 36-page religion paper
titled simply "Jesus," and every page was blank.
The professor had him sent home to get better.

Ray, I didn't know you were gay, and I wasn't your type,
and it never mattered.
You worked for three years teaching painting
at Walpole Penitentiary,
to murderers and rapists and killers.
On the last day you told them that you were gay
because you wanted them to know you, and that a person
could be OK and still be a faggot, but you didn't want them
to feel obliged to kill you in the process.

I didn't worry about the inmates so much as AIDS.
When people started to die you assured me you didn't do
the things that put a body at risk, but I worried anyway.
You visited twice after the cat exhibit,
and Rachel and I had had two kids, and our lives
took a sharp turn away from one another.
For a while you were in Cleveland, teaching at the museum.
Then Malaysia, doing I don't know what –
and that was where I lost you.

I called your parents, I called your friends,
no one would tell me where you were or what became of you.
I needed to understand because we were friends.
You once gave me a wonderful compliment,
you called me a human being
and that was so meaningful coming from you,
for whom human meant noble and feeling and alive and crazy
was not so bad, it was a sign you were paying
attention to things.
I admired you so, and if I had the great spotlight
of the world to direct
you would be turning in it now
like that dead cat in the gallery, abused in life and abused
beyond it, ugly and craggy and ridiculous and raw
but fully engaged, all muscle and mind alert
to life and life's unlikely opportunities

and the aurora borealis would shift and slide
and light up our faces like 1977,
and the light show on the Velvets in 1968,
and that trip to Rockport in '73 when we lay in the back
of the pickup truck watching the phone lines loop overhead,
when we were young and not yet treed or backed into
impossible corners, and the world that I saw, Ray,
the beautiful courage in the crowclaws of your grin
and the manic dazzle of your eyes,
radiant artist and friend of my youth,
I would have them know.

Little Bighorn ⁸

I take my boy to the battlefield
we pause in the locust grass
to read a warning sign, 'Beware
of rattlesnakes. Stay on the path!'

My son's little hand in mine
we climb the steady ridge
where the Sioux appeared that day
like feathered cougars in the sun.

I point out the crosses.
'The soldiers fell here, understand?'
'Yes, daddy, they stepped off the path
and the rattlesnakes bit them dead!'

⁸ The Brood (1992)

The Light⁹*

I talked about it and talked about it,
and now I can't look at it.

It was supposed to be visible a long way off.
Outside, but you could take it inside.
Though it came at the end of a long, lousy year,
and many dry miles of traveling,
it would be perfect.

And here it is, of all seasons, summer.
It comes and it's not what I thought it would be.
From the porch of my mom's house in Ohio,
fireflies brightening the dark.

I know how this goes.
In the end I'll congratulating myself, saying:
I knew it.
I knew it
but no one else could see it.

⁹ The Movie Under the Blindfold (1978)

* this was the concluding poem in The Movie Under the Blindfold. I think it may be the most self-pitying poem ever written. But it still seems true to me.

Home Trees¹⁰

My hometown was Amherst, "little town in the woods,"
a quarry town, "Sandstone Center of the World."
When the quarries were young, trees grew high and thin
from their floors.

Twenty years later, the quarries are deep with spring
and rainwater.

What's left of the tree trunks are rotten now.
But the hole continues to fill.

When I was little I walked the lake Erie bluffs,
the bushes came up to my shoulders.
Twenty years later, the bushes are trees, I'm more of a kid
than ever.

When my mom remarried we moved to Vermilion,
"Named for the Red Clay Used by Indians to Make Pots."
My stepfather Dick's dad bought land there,
planted poplar trees alongside the creek bank,
the site of the home Dick would build years later.
The poplar is favored for rapid growth,
grows straight and tall, makes an excellent windbreak,
and in summer its leaves turn upward
and shimmer like dimes.

But they don't live long.
Twenty years later they are all chopped down
and taking their place beside the house is the sweep
of a willow tree's arms.
Dick says the arms are too heavy, may break off
in a thunderstorm, may crash through the roof,
so he's sawing it down in the summer or fall.

Rachel and I made a trip that year to my towns,
and I showed her the house I grew up in.
Then there were cherry trees, apples trees, peach trees.
The orchards are gone now, their places taken
by split-level homes

¹⁰ Home Trees (1978)

of middle managers at the Ford Plant in Lorain,
"Best Location in the Nation."

And Rachel and I find a place on the bluffs to make love
and nap in the shade of utility poles.

In Praise of Granite¹¹

'My incense rises heavenward to thee'
Inscribed on Thoreau's chimney

The beer cans say they've been at it all summer,
The high school kids, parked on land that isn't their own,
Getting high and sliding their fingers in and out
Of one another's underpants.

Forty-eight years ago three bank robbers took
This quarry road, smashed through that gate,
And planted two sticks of dynamite under the safe
That lies in a heap this fine spring day
Like a four-legged corpse with a horrible wound.

Back in Cambridge, Ray looks at the picture
For the thousandth time, a Chinese print of a dragonfly
Lighting on a bamboo frond; it's almost invisible.

A few blocks away, I'm sitting on a granite curb
In front of an Episcopal abbey.
Someone is behind me, a monk with Japanese eyes.
Do you want to make a meditation, he asks.

In Concord, several kids have fun
Breaking bottles on the one stone left from the shed
On Walden Pond, dense granite it was.

Lying on our backs in the rear of Dirk's pick-up,
Ray and I watch as the wires loop from pole to pole,
The sudden explosions of treetops above us.

¹¹ Home Trees (1978)

My Bicycle ^{12*}

I set aside this perfect day to be with my bicycle.
Beautifully red, she's been mine
for three years.
I have just bought a pair of blue handlegrips.

Now for our free pirouettes in the sun.
There is no joy like this one.
Down a smooth hill
and into the wind, the low sound of whistling
in her spokes – I close my eyes
and trace a shiver down my spine.

Now we rest in the shade of a tree,
and my lovely bicycle, anxious
to please me,
guides herself in small circles.

Here, the figure eight.
Here, quick brakes!
I'm so proud, I applaud,
and my bicycle wheels sheepishly toward me,
sets her handlebar in my lap.

I stroke her saddle,
I murmur kind words.
When she stands before me,
her chain sags irresistibly,
her bearings rattle deep in her hind parts.

I mount her,
and we ride.

¹² Home Trees (1978)

* I thought this was daring in 1977 – a romance with a bicycle? Today it just seems sweet.

In the Corner Panel of the Saints Constantina and Ann ^{13*}

The first thing that always goes out are the lights.
Smothered by bells, they cry out, then go out.
The next things that go are the sleepers.

Look at the woman who dreamed of white lights
while the town she grew up in
is burning behind her.
Crazy, she knows she is in the wrong picture,
using up space,
in the way.

Why did it happen?
Who lit the fire?
The whole town collapses
like a scorpion dancing,
then touching its tail to its lips.

The moon is delighted, is yellow
as pee, steps forward and backward
in the flickering shadows.
The crackling houses bloom into
the flower of fire.

¹³ Home Trees (1978)

* There is no such triptych. I imagined it, on my sofa in Minneapolis, around 1975.

Letter From Como ^{14*}

Taking course to ospreys and antlions and the mauve noodle
stacked like rosaries in the outer office
Tonight it is quiet it is too quiet tonight
Taking course from the trail of rags and broken webbing
and the natives trembling under the giant banah leaves
And taking course dead reckoning from the moon
directly chuckling like the Old Bombardier
Take my course to the sailor awash and aflat
on the tarot deck
Take it to Queens and Pawtuxet and the all-nite laundromat
It steams like desire in the sleeping pile of woolens
And the natives pressed themselves thin as knives
pressed against the quivering chandelier
take it to Mom and Pop and the aging cheerleader
who ten years later still presses the torn photograph
against her ribs
It is too quiet it is sinister
It is number than any number
And what do I do oh what please say
is a pawpaw and a bobtail nag all the doodah day
Take it to America America in the springtime springtime in
America
because this is the garden of animal delight
the clean scrape of the dish on cement
Taking course to red jackals and jaydaws and the red noodle
Nailed to the waiting room like old magazines
It is better than that it is steadier than that
How do you do and welcome to Fabricburg
You can't tell the fours from the threes
You can't tell the flowers from the screams
No wonder they say we were made out of mud

¹⁴ Lucky You (1976)

* This is just a crazy dream. I used to go to Como Zoo a lot. It was free, and they let you take your dog in. Somehow everything twirled in a bucket one evening, and this is what I came up with. I felt at times that surrealism, which is silly on the surface, teaches you to surface emotions that “meaningful” sentences would tend to suppress. I'm grateful I went through this phase as it allowed me to figure out a voice, without having to have anything (much) to say.

Come out of your trees and your rivers and
Come to America come to Minnesota
Come to the click of cleats and the children
straddling the giant tortoise they have come
They have come for miles around
Come to the land of long letters of love the land of love
This is the land of the crackling barn
and the land of the infernal flower
and the land of big shovels
This is the home town this the sublime
This is the black underside of a million raw tabletops
Love scarred like burnt pleasure and bubblegum
These are its children and those are its heights
These are the fingers meshed and twined like cotton candy
Peanut shucks and gosh the divine crimentlies
Come to the straw and the cane and urine flowing like soda
Come to the land of poultry and the love of the condom
Come to the rinsed kidneys of the lost tribes
And the land of small children and dogs
They teem in the refuse like ambassadors for change
Come to the Como when the hibiscus are in bloom
and the drunks are in bloom and the tree sloths
Parasites bloom green in the skin
Come to the green swarming pond this year
we dredge there our memories
of kindness and jewels and breadloaves
and cannonshot rakes and quicksilver
Come when the tuna are jumping
and the children are jumping at cornbread and promises and
time
and the secrets of time This spring
the tiger is muttering remonstrances of love
And the banker noodle sits like a patient in the vestibule
Come to the 24-hour urgent care centers cursing
the revolving doors and the No Parking Zones
and the decisive victory in the field
Come to the spreading joy of a thousand elm trees
Two years from blight and the skinny roots of love
And the thousand children jumping in the night
Taken in dreams to a place beyond mountains
and the thousand mattresses no one turns over any more

Come to Como Brother John and Alphaea
Take to the hard streets and the harder walls
And take course to the parklights bathing the lost kids
And take course down the trillion rows of lilies and rot
take course to Como at a certain time of year
now here now gone forever now at the tip
of every tongue take course
by hunted animals strung by ropes
their bodies opened to the wind and to love
Flies singing seafaring stories in the breeze
Open and battered to the slim
curve of love

Who? ¹⁵

One of us quit, we don't know which.
But something packed up and left, leaving
 little behind.
One of us remained; we don't know who.

There are two blind sides to every corner,
 yet we slip notes in both directions.
Nearer than two kissing faces, between the
 cracks of worn ideas and remembered dreams;
 under the snow that dropped in a heap
 and killed everything green around us
 and in us; we know one thing:

One of us is dying, no one knows who.
Someone is going, we don't know where.
But we are busy like bees in our cells now,
 filling full the vacancy.

¹⁵ The Movie Under the Blindfold (1978)

The Important Thing ^{16*}

The hand inside my ribs is done tickling me, good.
Lately it's taken to tapping out rhythm on bones.
"When will I see you again?" "You won't."

It's the hottest day of my life, and the brightest.
In a higher country somewhere else
the kites are at it again, swooping
over meadows and hills.
Its children never scrape themselves.
Miles from a mother, they never need bandages.

Here my mailbox is fuller than I wish.
"It's over. Repeat. It's over. It's over."
I read on. "Now it's time to be happy. Be happy."

The call comes late at night, you descend,
one hand on the banister.
Go ahead, I tell you, tug at your clothes.
Your mother is gibbering herself all away,
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The end and beginning of life on earth.

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My Mom¹⁸

Delivering her eulogy,
I wanted to make it sweet,
The memories of a boy's mom
Across a long lifetime.

I rode beside her four times
In our old blue Plymouth
To the drivers license testing place
Along the gorge in Berea, Ohio.

I wanted to marry my mother then
And buy her a new Chevrolet
In two colors, red and cream
And make her smile again.

She was the oldest of six Irish kids
Raised poor on a Michigan farm,
Determined to make it out of there,
Sprout wings and split that place.

But she married a selfish man
And gave birth to a sick little girl
Who lived to be sixteen and after
Having her teeth pulled out, died.

There was no escaping after that
And no discussing the loss with her.
We continued to have get-togethers
In the big back yard, and the pictures

Show her smiling, but not really.
Only me and my brothers knew
How broken she was inside,
And how angry she was at the switch.

She liked to chat but she never laughed.
She liked to read but she didn't learn.

¹⁸ Moab (2005)

She loved her sons like gilded icons
But one by one she drove them all away.

For thirty five years she had diabetes.
Injections, blurred vision, black feet.
A husband died, a flood swept through,
Her heart attacks took away her home.

She spent her last year in my house,
Not happily. But I got to better
Understand her attachment to the past,
And her odd way of loving us.

So when the end to her suffering came
In a hospital room in Kentucky
And the doctors tried to yank her back,
And they called out the all-clear

I see her 49 Plymouth again
Splintering the guardrail by the gorge
Pedal to the metal, car over the cliff
She is rolling her eyes one last time

From the electricity ripping through
Her shredded circuitry, oh what
Can you do to me, I hear her demanding,
That you have not already done?

Living Without Friends ^{19*}

You told yourself you could do this without them
If you had their help it would undo the purpose
Recused yourself from the argument at hand
And folded into quietness there

You proceeded to suffer for a time
At your hunger and your loneliness
At the nothing there that swallowed you like a bug
And weeping nights from leaving them behind

You shut up like a foreclosed house
So never told a lie to those you loved
And never craved attention like a clown
So never disappointed or betrayed

So performed worthy work and set it
As an offering on the shelf of the world
So it was what it wanted to be
Clean and honest as a plank

Now when you think of them
It is no longer as temptation
Or the music of their laughter
Or the grasp of their embrace

But of the goodwill they bore you
Like a promise you would never meet again
Yet carry one another by the heart
Like a lantern that never goes out

¹⁹ Moab (2005)

* Around the year 2000 I noticed that I had fewer friends than before. People were dying, moving away, sometimes falling away. and not being replaced as in earlier times. So I wrote about this as if it were a virtue to be cherished – friendlessness. I don't think it's very persuasive,.

To His Missus Returned from the Sea*

First night she sleeps her back to me
like a semaphore signal

This vessel at anchor at last

I say missus, and that
stands for mistress,

and all that was lost in the elision

It is like master except thoroughly admiral:
"The mastress set sail on a plunging mattress"

Upright, midnight, recondite

Seamen hang listless in the rigging
Whitebacks stroke in the dinghy

Heaving their spume upon the sea

Lesser men wince because the captain is voluble:
How can you get a word in?

When edgewise is the most delicious way

Resting her harpoon against the wall
she slips inside the stiffened sheets:

Regina! my Queequeg! my queen!

* In 2008 my wife Rachel began making 4-7 week trips to the Arctic Circle to work as a doctor in Native Alaskan villages. My wife is an adventuress in her heart, and I am more of a homebody. These visits continue today, throughout all the difficulties we have been through. Nevertheless, I was able to write one funny poem about her comings and goings.

Old Girlfriends

I'm not supposed to but I think of them.
Not the way they are now, wise and complicated,
but the daffy way it was joyful to please me
when we were young and things were possible.

What a blessing their kindness was,
the future stretching out like airplane glue.
Me and them alive in the big house together,
Grateful to be able to get at one another.

I want to pick each one up in turn and spin her
And look into her eyes and say thank you
for thinking I was someone to dally with,
that our hours were somehow well-spent.

This one thought she saw something in the man.
This one said, He's not going to hurt me, or
He's not the one but he'll do for now, moments
gleaming like a badge upon my heart.

Summation

I know that you loved me
though the rails clacked
and the TV raged

because I was no good in the way
you would want good done
because I was the one

Particularly, or perhaps
it was the light of late afternoon
that rolled and stretched

like a davenport dream –
my hand on your hipbone,
like a witness taking an oath

At Fifty-Eight *

It is something to celebrate,
the day one turns fifty eight.

It is the midpoint of life's domain
the fun half spent, the rest remains,

one slowly cranks up the first high bend
then roars like thunder to the end,

I drag the bag of bent clubs that are mine
and commence the back nine.

* The joke here is insisting that 58 is life's midpoint

Shampoo ²⁰

When I was little I too howled
when the stuff got in my eyes
This before Johnson & Johnson was.

And though my mother cupped my brow
With the soft of her hand
And pointed to the spider

in the corner of the bathroom ceiling
The spider I was to watch
Until the coast was clear

I couldn't help myself, I looked
And the soap was like daggers
And I cried, how I cried

One day I discovered
You could live with the suds
If you simply closed your eyes

Until the foam was rinsed down
Your cheeks and escaped down the drain
But you had to be willing to do nothing

I want to get word to babies everywhere
Oh my stupid little friends
Wear the blindfold and you will never weep

²⁰ Moab (2005)

Sky Repair ²¹

As a child I had a recurring dream.
The sky was a tent-top of glass, or porcelain
And I saw a crack begin to form,
And it was my job to repair the crack.
I climbed a ladder to the brink of the sky
and I was patching the crack with spackle
When another crack formed,
and another, and another.
The profoundest grief swept over me,
Knowing my job was impossible to do.
The atoms of the universe were coming apart
And how did I get saddled with this.
Then I woke up to my sister dying in one room,
My mother sobbing in the next,
My father snoring drunk in the third.
The atoms of the universe coming apart,
And my job, repairing the crack.

²¹ My wife would say this is what's wrong with me, a lack of lightness, a sense that everything is on me. It arose from the sense I had, as a boy, that a great tragedy was forming around me – and somehow I had to stop it.

Drama King

The moment you cried out your disapproval,
Your stirring Hey! Lashed out against all falsity,
so sweet, the anger of almost being innocent,
the voice of that part of the sinful world
that did not think it was part of the sinful world

It tousled your indignation,
because there is now no distinguishing the real from the false
because there is no going back
until blood has been shed
and the old skin of need has been slithered out of
for good and discarded
in a husk of spent diamonds

And in that moment you were lost because
You enjoyed it perhaps a little too much,
And a sickening part of you knew
it would come back to that moment and try to recreate it,
again and again and again,
and summon fresh feeling against the lies of the world
and this time really give it the gas,
and this time your denunciation would be
more artful and more telling,
and this time the world would say,
wow, this is even better than the other time
and it is consummated

You are like a lunkheaded dog with only one trick
only instead of rolling over
you summoned all the authenticity you could simulate
on such short notice
and then like the leg of a wheel you spoke

and you were too young and too beautiful to explain
that they owed it to themselves to go fuck themselves
because you were in no mood to prostitute
the depth of your passion to salve their idiot wounds

and even on the off-chance that you did, they would just say
yes, that, there, you see, that's the thing you do
that is so remarkable

and then you must choose between killing them
with the only object available to you,
an ice-cream scoop with a silver handle
and what a concavity that will make in their foreheads
as if they had been blessed with a single wonderful idea
but now it has been ushered away

or turn your back on them
and wrap yourself in your cloak
and the night
and that will be that for them,
the beauty done and gone
and not to be darkening this doorstep again any time soon
and like Arthur Rimbaud, legless in Abyssinia,
you are borne away on a litter,
in a fever, raving and
firing your pistols

Druthers

I wish I was a better man
I wish I was more honest than I am

I am somewhat honest but prefer
to shade things in my favor

I am fairly kind, but with exceptions
as with the bombs in the basement.

My wife is right, I'm an angry guy,
and negativity scares people away.

I wish I could do a job just right,
just once, and have it be perfect, complete.

"That guy knew what he was doing,"
people would say. "That's the kind of man to be."

I wish I was the sort who radiates calm
and pleasantness and never flips the alarm.

But in fact I have this anxiety problem
so wishing is what I spend a lot of time on.

I don't know why I play the fool –
Perhaps to avoid being useful.

Farewell Curtis Hotel ²²

We had had a fight in October, 1969,
my California family and me,
and I grabbed a a shirt and my checkbook
with a few dollars in it from delivering
Fuller Brush for my dad that fall,
and hitchhiked to LAX, wrote out a check
and flew the red-eye into St. Paul.
And the limo driver listened to my tale
and dropped me off at the Curtis Hotel
where I shivered in my shirt by the revolving door
and waited by the ashtray stand for a friend
to come get me, while the first snow fell.

He finally came and took me home,
and told me I was on my own.
I got a job in a parts warehouse
and went to night school and did pretty well
and I got a good job, with a desk and a door,
and there met Rachel, after a while.
I used to take her Sunday mornings
to the brunches at the old hotel,
and feast on omelet and melon balls,
bouquets of roses and asphodel,
and the waiter kept our glasses full
of cheap champagne, and I would peel
a twenty from a roll of bills,
which I never begrudged at the Curtis Hotel.

We lost that job, but married anyhow.
We pledged our troth in a city park
and danced all day in a friend's front room,
but when it was time for the honeymoon,
we checked into the Curtis Hotel,
the only room we could afford,
a single window overlooking the mall,
but we slept in, switched off the bell,
our only night in the Curtis Hotel.

²² Ballad of the Curtis Hotel (1992)

Years later, my dad, no longer selling
door to door, had some interesting news to tell:
"Your mom and I were not doing so well,
we thought a trip together might be swell.
That's what's we have been meaning to tell
you: you were conceived in the Curtis Hotel."

I have this memory of when I was a child,
standing with my grandfather on the opposite shore
of the Mississippi in LaCrosse, and he pointed and said
Minnesota is just over there, and I repeated the word
and lingered on its power, and made a vow
to cross that river one day. So when the plane landed
years later and I stepped into the Curtis Hotel
I knew this was the place I would dwell.

When I saw it demolished on TV,
the cameras caught at the final moment
a window on the fourteenth floor slide up,
then shatter, as the building buckled
with the weight of the beds and bathtubs
of all those years, its bricks all shrugged
and its shoulders collapsed and went to hell.

And the people building the convention hall
on that site explained that no one was in Room 1410,
the crew had checked out every floor.
No homeless man could hide in a closet,
sure today was not the final day
(today is never the final day).
The opening window had no meaning,
it was no ancient honeymooner hollering No,
it was just an effect that a dying building feels.

The hum of death vibrating every sill,
so it throws up a window to let out a howl
and shout out the secrets of the Curtis Hotel,
and all the souls who sheltered there,
who slept, and wept, and shivered, and sighed,
and laughed, and loaded up their plates,

crawled into bed, and rose, and ate,
and tipped the doorman at the gate,
and drove away with no thought of farewell
to the spirits who stayed in the Curtis Hotel.

Just a Joseph ²³

for Dick Konik of Vermilion, Ohio (1929-1992)

This man is not my father, the boy told friends.
He is just a friend of the family,
he helps us get from place to place
while I go about my business. But
when an awl slipped, and a cedar sliver
slid into the web of his palm like a spear,
the proxy stooped and stroked the wound,
and coaxed the bloodied splinter out,
and greased the hole with workman's balm.

²³ The Brood (1992)

Cannon Falls²⁴

The sidewalk is beautiful,
one of those dry crystalline snows
that shine in the moonlight
like white sparking wires.

We ate too many rolls at the supper club.
Back at the bed and breakfast,
the bubble lights on the Christmas tree
are boiling.

Rachel reads on the sofa,
I sit in the library and pull book
after book from the shelves.
Baseball books, history, politics, poetry.

In one is a poem by Jon Silkin
about the death of his child.
It is so heartbreaking I read it twice,
and the sorrow saws through me.

Suddenly I don't hate poetry,
it is not false or vain or unimportant,
it is a way to talk and think
about things that matter most,

because in a hundred words
I felt the stab of the boy's passing and
the sundering of the parents,
sweetness and horror all there on the page,

and I want more, I pull a dozen books
down from the shelves
and careen crazily through them,
greedy for more minds, more lives.

Every paragraph seemed to sing,
every poem a shiver, people's picture

²⁴ The Brood (1992)

snapped in the moment of a lifetime,
and I felt no envy only joy.

My chest hurts, I step outside
and walk toward town.
The Zumbro River is frozen over,
but I hear water by the bridge.

The falls are tumbling brown
from the limestone table,
like a greasy comb of water
in winter. It is just starting

to snow again, and Rachel
is there, and takes my arm,
and we head home, middle-aged,
coughing frost in the silent air.

Hot and Cold Running Good Friday²⁵

A cold warm day in April May
when the bulbs crouch, cowards
behind bolted doors, occasional showers
and occasions of sin dampen
the sidewalks and moisten the skin,
water flows as the torture twists
my grin to a grimace, my hands into fists.
How many times battered by road
I looked up and there was no veil
to mop my brow. Our father
who art in heaven, I love the Jew
who died for me though it is all
nonsense I know and April is a foolish,
cruelish month, and poems are litter,
cartwheeling creatures,
flyers, circulars, winging their way
beneath my feet and the stone rolls away.

²⁵ Ballad of the Curtis Hotel (1992)

Minivan²⁶

We could not afford a good one but this
was good enough for us,
brown high-rider, automatic, slant six.
When we bought it we were in awe,
it smelled like road angel,
and though it had already rolled
ninety thousand uphill miles
with strangers in its seats
we felt it had been waiting all along
for us. I washed it, and stickered it,
and drove it to the store.
We were partners, it and I.
So when I left it for an hour at the park
and some guy smashed the passenger
window with a tire iron and stole
several hundred dollars of audio tapes
I got at the library for our trip out west,
I blamed myself, I should never
have left my treasure alone.
And when we sailed west through badlands
and buttes, and we filled our thermos
at Wall Drug, and bought doughnuts for the kids
it was with a new covenant between us,
a promise to take care of her.
We parked it near the motel door every night,
we locked it up and took the cameras inside.
And when I left our wallet and cash
on a trash receptacle at a convenience store
high in the Montana Rockies,
and we realized it was gone
and had a look in our eyes that had elements
of hope and elements of despair
and we sped back twenty miles up the mountain
our minds hard from wishing,
and there it was, people walking by,
good decent wallet-ignoring Montañards,
and we drove on, toward the Idaho border

²⁶ The Brood (1992)

and beyond that, to the brightening sea,
tearful with happiness and love
for you, Grand Voyager, for you.

To a Woodpecker ²⁷

I too have been banging my head
like a jackhammer of bone
on the trunk of a tree
till my thoughts rattle round
like Odysseus for home.
Will I pry apart cambium with my nose
and find grubs in the soft meat
or will I spend a lifetime
skullstruck up a pole
reiterating the error of my life?

²⁷ Sunset Lake (1989)

Drunken Houseguest

Rakhan weaves his promise with a finger
I want to learn English the best Mister Mike

I want to studying every day
All the people being speaking the best

All my families believe in my success
Because that is my name, I am the cornerstone

I am not supposed to alcohol I know
But America, well, America no problem

And the woman in the bank with bare knees
Is not prostitute, she is made to be that way

One day I tell my family everybody listen
Mister Mike is most excellent teacher

At the Lake ²⁸

The day has had its way with us,
and now in the glimmer
the swans steer clear
of the clank of canoes,
couples lean into one another at the hip,
and a man on a bicycle speeds by
sobbing, in red shoes.

²⁸ Borrowing from Minneapolis (To Pay St. Paul), 1980

The Wreck of the Hesperus²⁹

On a foggy morning in '76
I idled my VW at the intersection
of Cedar and 28th Streets,
awaiting the traffic light's decision.

Stealing through the mist nearby
a two-axle truck headed for the landfill
manned by Steve and his uncle Guy,
would soon have a screaming handful.

The garbage truck in overdrive
gathered speed in lightly falling rain.
My fevered brain could not surmise
the convergence of the twain.

I heard a poem in my ear.
The light was red, but turning green.
I slipped the Superbeetle into first gear
and throttled the machine.

The truck's enormous left front tire
rolled up onto my hood,
and the truck ramped into the air,
all white and beautiful and good.

My car stopped instantly, crushed.
I watched the truck fly o'er
the intersection, and the great nose pushed
itself into the asphalt floor.

The axles snapped and spun away.
Two wheels in tandem headed east.
The great container heaved and swayed
and tipped and dumped its feast.

Coffee grounds, eggshells, cereal
boxes scattered wide and far.

²⁹ The Ballad of the Curtis Hotel (1994)

The screeching metal carrier
scraped street and gave off sparks.

Banana peels, venetian blinds,
and Sunday comics sections.
Burned out light bulbs and orange rinds
with jotted down directions.

I saw a flattened beach ball skin
flapping in the truck's rubble.
I saw Guy and Steve stagger from within
and feared there might be trouble.

The men seemed drunk and at a loss.
Their feet met no resistance.
People on the sidewalks paused
to offer their assistance.

Me, I crawled from the front seat,
cassette deck in one hand.
I had a small bump on my head
but was otherwise able to stand.

An ancient man from a nursing home
stepped forward with accusing eye.
He gestured with his finger bone
that I was to draw nigh.

"Young man," he asked in squeaky falsetto,
"What church do you go to?"
I asked why the old man wanted to know.
"Because I want to go to that church, too."

University Avenue ³⁰

I was working at M&L Motor Supply on University Avenue across from Wards, making \$108 a week as an order filler guy while attending college part time. It was 1969.

My job was to take phoned in orders, push a cart through the warehouse, locate the parts that were in stock, box them for shipment, and backorder the rest.

This particular day I was standing on a step stool poking at the box-end of a Mopar combo tailpipe and muffler for a '64 Plymouth Fury when the pipe began sliding down toward me.

The box was eight foot long, contained 46 lbs. of hardened steel. It was falling now, falling from the stacks, sailing down to me like a bride, and it struck me on the left side of my forehead.

The blow alone would have knocked me out, a baseball bat could not have hit harder but first it sent the ladder teetering, back, back until I fell backward and crashed to the floor.

When I came to I was changed. I struggled to stand. My fingers tingled. I felt an egg, a protruding bud from my brow. I looked in the mirror in the dirty warehouse toilet and washed away the blood.

And I remembered. I had a final exam at one o'clock in my class on prosody in the Humanities Building

³⁰ The Ballad of the Curtis Hotel (1994)

at the University. I had completely forgot.
The Borg Warner clock over the carburetor kits said 1:25.

Snow was falling and wind was blowing,
I staggered out to the street in T-shirt, tie-dyed
but I did not feel cold. A 16-A bus was just approaching
from Hamline Avenue, and I boarded, wild-eyed.

Where's your money? The driver asked. Eighty five cents!
I looked at him like Long John Silver under the egg
and said You have to get me to the University!
and took a seat halfway to the back.

The passengers were coming home from morning shift.
One man wore a hat that said Gopher Gears,
And the same word on his jacket and thermos.
The phrase has stuck with me over the years.

I sat quiet but in my mind I was standing and telling them
Do not be afraid my brothers and sisters,
I will make the journey from St. Paul to Minneapolis,
I will do business there with TAs and professors,

I will be valorous in my actions and acquit myself
in a way you will be proud of. The assembly
and forklift people will not be ashamed this day
of one of their own climbing the heights of classical poetry.

I stepped off the bus at the University quad,
made my way to Ford Hall Room 108, burst
through the door, and every eye looked up
at the egghead from the Midway in the torn T shirt.

I grabbed a blue book from the stack and read the question:
Analyze Houseman's "Eight O'Clock" and explain
how poetic form helps further the poet's message.

Ordinarily I might have struggled in vain

with this assignment but I had been struck
by a muffler from the gods, and I had insights
I had never had before, when the pipe hit me full
it poured into me a galaxy of lights.

I knew this poem by heart somehow. I had knelt
on its floor and drunk its dark waters.
I scanned the poem in fifteen seconds and
began to write in the book, in big black letters.

"Each sprinkle of the clock tower bell
brings the condemned man closer to his time.
Each stanza of the poem is his knell,
each line a stair to, trembling, climb."

I stood and threw the blue book on the desk,
the astonished professor shrank as I left the hall
and the graduate students on scholarship
whispered about the mysterious boy from St. Paul.

I would get an A, of course, but that was not
the point, I was transformed, beyond dreams.
I stood on the walkover bridge and gazed out over
the brilliant white cloud of toilet paper plant steam.

Gods and goddesses choose us mortals not
by our bloodlines or superior mothering
but because a magnet pulls metal down from the sky
that tempers and makes us fit vessels for suffering.

University Avenue begins at the Capitol
and peters out only God knows where, in Blaine.
But I am with you to the fullness of time,

and in my bones and skull I map your pain.

Overdraft Notice

The blue wind that blows through the soul
blows cold, it scatters leaves and opens envelopes
with your name hovering in the cellulose window.
You know in an instant the news will be painful.
You cry my god and fall to your knees.
Sometimes you go long weeks without opening them,
sometimes you hide them under phone books
because if no one else sees them they maybe never came.

Other people's lives seem unhaunted, they write
the amount of each check and subtract it from the balance,
it is a wholly unsatisfactory way. And yet
they don't get these things all the time,
whereas you don't go six months without one, and if
you get one on a Monday chances are good
you will get another Tuesday, and even if
you go to them and thrust fistfuls of loose cash
in their hands and pockets and say please, please
take my money, and they look at you
the way people look at an unclean child,
You will get another notice Thursday.

Each one costs \$20 but you don't mind, you are glad
the bank is getting something for its trouble
and for putting up with you, you who were never meant
to carry money around or write checks
when something wonderful catches your eye.
These thin slips of paper with the blue circles
that identify your sin and decide your punishment
are your judges in this life. You bow to their power
and file them away in the secret shrine of pain,
and scurry away to places of pleasure,
bouncing end over end.

The Orchard ^{31*}

My family's home in the Firelands in Ohio in the '50s
had about fifty apple and a dozen cherry trees.
In the spring the blossoms would roll through in waves,
the cherries first, followed by the white apples,
then the rose colored apple blossoms, like tied tufts of crepe,
kleenex blossoms on wires, until the orchard
was a carpet of apple shag almost lilac in color
and the crabapple trees whose rusty dots
planted cinnamon in the air.

³¹ The Orchard, 2009

* This poem was published as an art book by Richard Stephens' Supersession Press in 2009 – the week of my daughter's death, as I recall. Only 63 copies exist, and they cost \$125 or so. The poem reminds me of 'A Child's Christmas in Wales' – a wry remembering of growing up in Amherst, Ohio. It is possible to view a copy of the book [at this link](#).

The trees were only 20 feet tall, perfect for kid climbing.
We swayed in them for hours on summer afternoons,
gnawing the first bitter beads, nodding at this year's flavor, it was
the ideal moment, before the worms invaded.
Because we were small we could climb to the highest twigs
and the wind would hold us up there, heads poking
through the canopy, gazing out over the flapping leaves.
I made a tree fort around the trunk of one
out of stolen plywood and ceramic tiles, I would sit in it by day
and sketch blueprints in a spiral notebook.

I slept in it a few times, and drew up plans to include my friends
in, like a university where we would
tell one another what we had read in books,
about dinosaurs and what kinds of clouds there were.
I planned to buy a sprayer and a bottle of malathion
and hook it up to a hose and advance through the orchard
dealing death to parasites and life to the fruit,
hose away the scaly mites and red cedar worms
that riddled the sweet green meat.

And my brother could maybe tell us about the Civil War,
He read the thickest books on our couch, like Sinai stones
and us boys would all be professors, trading wisdom
by the boysenberry bramble where the Queen Anne's lace
teased the butterflies and last year's lost baseballs lingered
underfoot, the color of beaten weeds. When the apples were of a
suitable size we used them as baseballs,
smashing one after another with Louisville Sluggers
till they wept furious milk, high over the monkeyball trees
and into the murk of the chugging swamp.

A giant St. Bernard named Topper, who belonged to the landlord,
sometimes lumbered through, jowls dripping,
a dazed, mortal look on its face, like the Cid mounted up
for one last ride, and we would drop our bats
and run into the barn, and hide in the cornrick
till Topper had passed, unaware of his harmlessness.
We mounted a basketball hoop on the side of the barn,
and used to play PIG and HORSE and other animal games.
We had nothing else to do, we played AMOEBA
And CORNBORE and SMUT.

Sometimes my brother would stand on one side of the barn, and me on the other, and we would throw a football over the roof to each other. You couldn't tell where it would appear as it crossed the roofline, and the ball seemed to pop into reality there, like a sword held up by a supernatural hand from an anodized water trough. There was a corn grinder we used to stuff ears of hard dented corn into, and the cobs would pop out the end, shiny and red and clean, like a basket of fresh pulled teeth. Then one day the barn caught fire and burned.

My dad ordered us to mow the yard, but the mower
was self-driven and we could not control it as it skidded
over the fallen apples, swerving and sawing,
scalped the fallen apples with its blades, and sprayed the slash
around our ankles while we pushed, and yellow jackets
would sneak into our pantlegs and sting us good.
The rest of the time the machine didn't run, and our dad
would hike up his pants and prostrate himself on the slab
peering up at the glass gas-ball, emory board the sparkplug gap,
and crank the cord, but that mower would never start,
Patrick and I had broken it with our minds.

And in the fall the rotting apples blanketed the yard,
bumpy and squishy and brown, and the whole world smelled like
cider and we had to rake them into piles
with garden rakes, and the apples stuck on the tines of the rake,
and we'd stop and pluck them off every half minute.
Then we set the piles of knobby apples on fire
and the sweet stink of roasting mash would swamp the
neighborhood, and somewhere the muskrats and possums and
raccoons that we knew only as furtive figures
humping across dirt roads at night stood up, sniffed
the evening air and took notice.

At the heart of the orchard stood a pyramid of railroad ties,
dripping creosote, that we played King of the Mountain on,
but gingerly, because the ties were always giving way,
and wolf spiders made their home in among the tarry beams.
And when Mr. Thomas bulldozed the orchard lot and built a tract
home where my tree fort had been, the new neighbors used the
beams as rifle targets, and you could hear the bullets slitting
through the leaves sometimes, and it wasn't safe
to wander over that way any more, and we were getting older
anyway.

But a part of me still bundled up after snowfalls and legged it down to where the creek trickled through the trees, and thundered through the thin new ice in my rubber galoshes.

Then in the spring, when the blossoms once again lit up the remaining patch of trees, I would wonder if this was the year to spray, and stop the cedar scabbing, rout out the inevitable worms, put red fruit on the table in a painted bowl and earn our childhood finally, by acting decisively, consciously, with purpose and poise, like good kids, but other things happened, and we didn't.

Four Jewels ³²

for Rachel

Christmas time and you and I
And our two kids in tow,
Tobogganing down Highland Hill,
Diamonds hiding in the snow.

I remember you in spring,
I would do anything to hear you laugh.
Seeds explode and send up shoots,
Emeralds peeking from the grass.

Dismal rain at Lake Itasca,
Summertime and you and I
Curse the bugs and zip the tent,
Sapphires shining in the sky.

Our children are beautiful,
We did the best we could,
When they are gone, I still love you,
Rubies moving with our blood.

The Bale-Door Ledge ³³

This place is neither
Here nor now and
Neither are the two bare
Legs dangling from the
Bale-door or the
Congregation of
Sunflowers craning
Below for the holy
Glimpse.

Twenty years since these
Boards saw a broom, and now
The mud climbs under
The roosting beam in
Strutting sharps and
Flats.

This place that is no
Place at all is a mile
And a year from what we
Know, lifetimes of
Thought from the twitch
Of the paw of the
Injured dog lying on the
Shoulder of the high-
Way in,

Or farther on, a car
Upside down and standing
Beside it a man,
Scratching his head with
His cap.

It all dissolves, a
Dream from which the
Sleeper awakens to two
Hornets clutched and
Teetering on the wrist's
Soft skin,
And outside the terraces
Swelling and snapping.

³³ Borrowing from Minneapolis (To Pay St. Paul), 1980

I think of my mother in
Her old yellow house-
Coat, shaking out rugs on
The porch.

The Pittsfield Tornado ³⁴

Easter twister scrapes
through town, a hoe
of steel in the grip
of God.

Away with
winter's
hangers-
on
and break
fresh ground
for
plant-
ing.

³⁴ Borrowing from Minneapolis (To Pay St. Paul), 1980

Thank You ³⁵

To the biker with the face of a pirate
streaming slowly down Marshall Avenue,
colors jazzed in the the window
of the Pump'n'Munch,
front-wheeled Harley out to here,
leather pants and beard of steel,
my one-year-old boy craning
in his dinky blue stroller to see you pass,
like Jesus entering Jerusalem gate,
and you waved.

Upon Borrowing Money
To Pay My Taxes³⁶

I wander down to the riverbank
where the two great rivers join.
It is a drizzly day and my shoes sink
into the brown ooze of April
like laden canoes.

I think of my accountant, pale and
eager for the rest she has earned,
the long sleep and the margarita
suspended above like a salty-eyed angel.

I rejoice in her triumph;
she is indifferent to my pain.

In the river a brown mallard quacks
and her mate quacks back,
his head and neck as green
as the money of the saved,
and I wonder why was I born.

³⁶ Borrowing from Minneapolis (To Pay St. Paul), 1980

The Brood ³⁷

I don't want to share anything with you,
I want to be alone late at night,
I want to drink until I'm dry,
I want to make secret journeys down the dank streets
where married men don't venture,
I want rooms of clinking crystal
and appreciative smiles,
jokes tumbling from my lips
like silvery grunions
slapping in moonlight.
I don't want to help carry groceries in from the car,
groceries I will never eat,
go for endless walks that take us nowhere,
rub your back when mine is killing me,
I want sleep forever under sparkling snows
and dream of ballgames and girlfriends
and the years of good times before
this dagger snaked its way into my breast,
I am afraid of waters and doctors
and the look on your face
when you are in trouble.
I want to undo everything, erase my assent,
irradiate my sperm, run off
to a nation that is beaches only,
that welcomes heels and celebrates
desertion and whose official flower
is the beget-me-not.
And yet,
to be father
of this melon thing in you
with all its sweet red stuff, and seeds and rind,
is a grand endeavor, and I see plainly in your eyes
that this is your wish and because I am your slave by heart
I accept the full penalty, let them come, let them swarm on me
like ticks, I will bounce them and change them
and wipe them clean as if they were my own
and all the while knowing where once there was life

³⁷ The Brood (1992)

is now only children, and the windblown fluff
that was once my hide is all that remains
of a boy who loved
to play.

In a Tent ³⁸

I would like the night to be over.
I would like my mattress to reinflate.
I would like my sleeping bag to stay where I put it
and not slide toward the lowest corner of the tent.
I would like the morning to suddenly be here.
I would like the pain in my kidneys to ease.
I would like to be able to get up, find the zipper
and pee in the bushes without walking into
fresh spiderweb and imagining its builder
tightening its hairy noose around my penis.
I would like to close my eyes and dream
of happy times and happy places,
not children tied to chairs and forced
by cruel kidnappers to eat cold chop suey
with pimentos, the canned kind.
I would ask that whatever is making
that chug and response sound down
by the lake edge finish its business and shut up.
I would like my teeth to not taste like someone else's.
I would like to take a long shower
and wash my butt, and shampoo
the pine sap out of my hair.
I would like, when morning finally does come,
that I could stand and walk the way I used to,
not this rickety post-stroke hitch
last night left me with.
I would like for a day so sunny and so dry
that it would drive the damp like Rommel's camels
from my sodden bag and towels.
I would like for zippers to zip, stakes not to bend double,
socks not to electrostatically
attract pine needle, foxtail and burr.
I would like my wife, who is sleeping so beautiful beside me,
her cheekbones catching the half-moon light,
to awaken and hold me and offer me
succor for my pains.
I would like if it nature did not require this expensive

³⁸ Sunset Lake (1989)

entourage for me to spend a night in it,
and I call on God with all the influence
I can summon, allowing first
that I do love the mountain and I do love the tree
to explain why the cost of a little beauty is so much pain,
while I slump like Achilles in my tent,
blinking at the canvass sky.

Priests ³⁹

Even on the most sweltering days
when cement workers and waitresses
were tottering in the pews,
the priests suited up in all the layers –
alb, cincture, chasuble, stole.
The acolytes looked on with open mouths
as the priests dressed, muttering.
They appeared powdered, as if with corn starch,
their pale parts blanching in the gymnasium light.
Their hands fluttered through the blonde cabinetry
alighting on oils and incense, linen and gold,
muscatel, ribbons, and thin coins of bread,
the looks on their unlined faces all duty,
half lonely men, half swans.

³⁹ Sunset Lake (1989)

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