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*A Penny for the Poet?*

*Poets are born to suffer, of course, but here's a rare opportunity to pat one on the head. Your donation to Kraken Press will help keep this site up and running.*

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## *THE DOG OF GOD*

The dog of God has no free will.  
He lives by the master's convenience.  
Left alone for long periods to fend for himself,  
Nothing to drink, not a scrap in the bowl.  
Parasites, ear mites, worms in the flesh.  
The rapier teeth of a hundred invaders  
Have left their marks, and the old whiskered maw  
Is white with the years. A cataract clouds  
The left brown eye, the malformed other perpetually weeps.  
His loping gait is long since gone, he limps  
And hobbles from gate to gate.  
But when the Master returns from his business  
The hound of heaven staggers down the path to meet him,  
Manged tail clapping with joy.

*BEAR'S DEN, 1977*

In the Bear's Den Bar on Franklin Avenue  
a stuffed black bear looks down from the countertop  
like a spirit through a cloud of smoke,  
the room of pickled Ojibwe faces, nearly as preserved  
as the animal. I live just a block away,  
in a building with the porch falling off.  
Summer nights friends and I will tiptoe  
onto the sagging boards, drink wine and watch  
the passing trade. Next to Bear's Den  
was a laundromat that burned to the ground,  
with a painting on the side of a big white woman  
in red pumps and dress, and she was so happy,  
the sign said Meet Me At Giant Wash.  
But she never got to finish folding that bedspread  
on the side of the building, they hauled her rubble  
away in trucks, still smoldering, because  
a tenant upstairs lit up and dozed off.  
One by one the neighborhood gets carted away,  
and the big black bear, paralyzed, teeth bared,  
each hair erect with nicotine dew, is next.

## *GREAT BLUE*

I call you Ichabod after a crane I once knew by that name,  
ich-, like a fish, sides gleam like a galaxy,  
bod, the figure of an ungainly stickthing,  
half coral, half coathanger bent to make bird.

Ichabod, I switch off my ignition after grinding to a dusty stop  
on an October Sunday morning by the Graham Lakes  
where you stand one-legged in ankle-deep water,  
the first hint of wind from the winter collecting in your crest.

It must be a hard season for herons and men  
because here I sit frustrated with the newspaper  
and there you stand guarding eggs too late from the cold.  
We eye one another like impractical alternatives.

I am buried in the business of words and events  
and spend my days scrawling captions to pictures of the outdoors,  
flank twitching ponies face into the wind, deer alert to the click  
of the shutter, geese in formation over blue-shingled roofs.

Mornings the discouraged Chevrolet guns these gravel roads  
to the office and the computers and inkpots and phones  
and the city of unkindness built out on the prairie,  
so close to the pulse and so far from the heart.

The vinyl of the carseat squeaks as I peer over the wheel at you  
nudging your eggs with your beak. I wonder if your babies  
are dead, and you've been poking the hollow shells  
since the tuft-lined hatching days of spring.

Too bad the two of us can't fly off together. I would siphon  
my last gas tank into Farmer William's Massey-Ferguson,

and sign a note saying OPEC smiled on him, and let my car roll  
into the pebbles and goose grease of East Graham Lake.

And when you spread your gangly cardboard arms  
I would take hold and we would rise up together above the world  
high over the marsh where the beaver battens his hatch  
against the cold and the brittle gifts we give each other die.

We would shoot across the sky like broomstraws in a storm,  
beyond deadline and heartache, and your eye would find new roost  
above the clouds, and I would be your baby bird  
spattered and spare in the nook of your wing.

*THE GODDESS IN COMO CONSERVATORY*

**AFTER TOULOUSE LAUTREC**

She wanted a shadow as much as a friend  
yet she yanked drunkenly the thing on her leash.  
Elegantly tired of the familiar faces,  
she had the talent to snag men by the eyes.  
Killable and toothless all soon surrendered;  
whatever powers they once had soon left them.  
Here was an extraordinary success,  
hands and knees and other parts approaching her  
from every corner in a prayer of peristalsis.  
In her was a map charting decades and distances  
broader than the thoroughfares of light  
she delighted in. What she wanted  
was a pavement to the stars of the crushed bones  
of her numberless supplicants, and her worry was  
that somehow all the things she dearly wanted,  
were they to prove as clear as the teardrops  
she'd extracted, one by one, she might get.

## *ULTRASOUND*

First glimpse of the child sent to replace me  
Is of glassine bone and milky skull.  
Two hearts quicken, ages in ages yawn.

Doctors chat and diddle buttons,  
Knead the image squirming on their monitors --  
A handful of centimeters from ulna to shoulder,

The gauge of the brain-pan,  
The auspicious twelfth rib.  
There the heart, like a tulip sprouting from the chest,

The kiss-blowing machine, the plunge  
Of its pumping, the determined sucking  
Already underway.

The astronaut, wound round its cord,  
The slack-eyed hero, the virtueless saint  
Is selfing itself into light.

I gasp, from fear.  
Little glue-boy, little glue-girl,  
What will you come to?

No peace, no peace.  
Your home all storm, a tempest of blood,  
And in all that ocean one swimmer is stroking,

Stroking and stroking,  
Keen to the sound  
Of thunder underwater.

And I who will be inexplicably perfect  
To you for all your living days  
Gaze into the gray of your hollows.

## *BABY DANGER*

The night the baby was born,  
And the midwife left,  
And our friends finished off the champagne,  
We wrapped it twitching in a white cloth  
And set it between our bodies in the bed.

Sleeping rigid as steel bars,  
Terrified we'd roll upon the being  
And smother the life,  
And dreamed of it sliding to its death  
Under dark waters,  
Dreamed it fell from countertops,  
Chairs, cracked like eggs on the baked varnish  
Of the world.

We dreamed of leaving it exposed  
And found it blue and chapped upon snow,  
Or turning one moment and looking back  
To the crib rocking emptily, emptily,  
All of our reasons  
Suddenly missing.

There was a decade of our lives or more  
When we could lie down upon cold tracks  
And drink and nod off  
And not worry about morning.

Now everything is heat,  
And distant thunder.  
The moon puts its shoulder to the shade,  
Peering in like the dumbstruck  
Passenger on

Two frightened adults  
And a small sleeping girl.

## *IN THE NIGHT*

My little girl awoke in the night  
quaking with fright,  
and I held her and explained  
that the monsters were gone,  
they were never there at all,  
and the look she gave me was, I recall,  
almost one of pity, as if  
I were the doomed one, mine the swift  
tumble coming soon.  
I rocked her to sleep in her room  
and thought of every plane  
I wanted to see go down,  
every siren shearing the dark  
were heading toward my part  
of town, my god, and all I  
have is a child to protect me.

## *WHEN WE ARE GONE*

When we are gone and the plates of the earth  
have shrugged,  
and the cupboards rattle and the rafters sift,  
and the groaning household teeters on the brink  
and the song of consciousness decays,  
what calendar will cordone off its days?

When we are gone and the rub of reaching fills the world,  
and root and branch and tongue and paw  
all strain as one for what is just beyond,  
sugar, sunshine, water, meat,  
and the hummingbird suspended in the air,  
what mind, what glance encapsulates it there?

When we are gone and the dust of our doing has flown  
and there are no longer angels and no men,  
And our home and our skin and our story of love  
give way to hozannas of flies,  
what spectators swarm the empty choir,  
sockets twitching with surmise?

When we are gone and meaning loses meaning  
though your molecules and my molecules  
are plucked apart and strewn  
across this raw unwitnessable scene  
they are better for that blink of time,  
forgotten in the giddy sprawl of green.

## *AIRPLANE*

whitecapped, waterlapped,  
lake michigan from on high  
is an endless song of blue

when I was young I used to look down  
on the hodgepodge world of farms and homes  
like a checkerboard of comings and going  
signifying nothing a Mondrian

a Michigan of intersecting checks  
I am flying home to my children  
from my father's bed

for four days I watched his hands  
one belonged to the man I knew  
a hammer familiar and hard and

when he grasped me I shrank to a boy  
the feeling of his pulse dancing  
against mine hot black coffee  
gulped down before work

the other hand was a stranger to me  
given to strange attitudes and willful wandering  
against his will moving through the air  
like an angel testing its wings

and when the tumor silent as a kraken  
in his head began to growl  
he looked at me with his steely wink

that froze me like a stag

and said oh boy oh boy oh boy  
and rang my hand like a bell

I look at all the squares below this plane  
at the tracts and plattes and partitioned acres  
and I grieve for the danger in every corner  
loving every right angle and knowing

every brick vibrates with pain  
and every board smokes from the ache of its hoping  
and I think of my children pink and bright and new

who cried when I left them and I forgive  
Chicago and all its sins  
all are human striving living proud

no one suspecting a dot in the sky  
could cry

*HOT AND COLD RUNNING  
GOOD FRIDAY*

A cold warm day in April or May  
when the bulbs crouch, cowards  
behind bolted doors, occasional showers  
and occasions of sin dampen  
the sidewalks and moisten the skin,  
water flows from me 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 catch my sweat, 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 earth I roll away.

*THANK YOU*

To the pirate faced biker  
streaming slowly down  
Marshall Avenue,  
colors jazzed in the  
night time light,  
front wheeled Harley  
out to here, black  
jacket man with beard  
of steel, who saw my  
one year old boy craning  
in his blue stroller,  
and waved.

*UPON BORROWING  
TO PAY MY INCOME TAX*

Too early to pick my son up from day care,  
and having to go pretty bad,  
I wander down to the riverbank  
to the place where  
the Minnesota and  
Mississippi join.

It is a gray and drizzly day  
and my feet sink into the brown  
twig and leaf ooze of April  
like heavy-laden birch bark canoes.

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

A woman out walking her grandkids looks  
as whitened and windblown as the Indian women  
who gathered sticks here.  
Her eye has a faraway look, she says to me,  
"It's coming back to life, don't you think?"

As I stand by the water a jet plane  
rises up out of the cliffs, over  
the old stone fort, larger and heavier  
than any life I knew,  
roaring and rising like death  
awakened by bees.

The rain falls heavier, and I think of  
my accountant, pale and shiny-eyed,  
eager for the rest she has earned,  
the long sleep and the margarita suspended  
above us like a salty-eyed angel.  
I rejoice in her triumph, as she is  
indifferent to my pain.

I remember why I came this way  
and pee upon an ancient wall.

*I HATE IT MORE THAN YOU DO, MARIANNE*

**"IMAGINARY GARDENS WITH REAL  
TOADS IN THEM."**

I hate it more than you do, Marianne, I hate  
The sighing and heaving and jockeying  
For position. I hate the having  
To get into the mood, the  
Chase, the coy  
Cultivation  
Of op-  
Posites.  
I hate the  
Strutting that precedes  
The first move, I hate the feigned  
Surprise that follows. I hate the protestations  
Of no, no, as if this was not what you wanted,  
All you wanted, all along, to be prodded  
And forced through the hoop  
One more time, and  
The accent  
And null,  
And  
The accent and  
Null, till the element  
Spurts from the unit out into  
Its grin of decay, and afterward,  
The depleted sag and the limping off stage,  
The slight curl of smoke, propitiation to gods who  
Couldn't care less,  
And yet,  
When the fit is good,  
And one's hands encompass

The soft arc of the dreamed for,  
The sought after circles, and all spins  
Round as new as youth and as right as truth,  
Like the rise and crescendo of flat stones skipped  
On the water's face and I behold anew how your slim bones  
Gleam platinum in the glad light of earth,  
And I enter you again with a smile,  
And I think the world has no  
Need of this, nor  
May you, but  
I do.

*MOMENT, 1952*

I remember little else  
of a family trip to Florida  
when I was three, my brother five,  
just the road appearing up ahead  
and vanishing again behind us,  
an endless hour descending a curving slope  
in the Smokies, and in the light of day  
the disappointing chartreuse dotting  
the citrus grove. And once one afternoon  
my mother fetched me into her arms  
and carried me from the beach and  
Patrick had to follow on his own.  
From over her shoulder I watch him  
stumble toward us. Then a keen feeling  
in me that I would always remember this  
like a bookmark in my life, that it was  
just one moment in a span that one day began  
and one other day would end, years might pass  
and this life our ours come loose on us,  
and the whole world groaned and took  
one step backward.

## *THE BROOD*

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

## *JONATHAN UNDER THE HACKBERRY TREE*

Backyard radio baseball game  
My son on my lap looking up  
Through springtime treetops  
As we sway in our canvass swing.

Our father who art in hammock  
Hollow be thy chest.  
One man on, Puckett steps up  
And lines a shot to right,  
Thy kingdom come,  
Thy heartbeat drum  
Now and at the hour of death amen.

I thought I would have more poems  
Welling up in me about my little son,  
Telling images of flesh and skin  
A single drop of an ancestor's blood  
Roaring down the tunnel of time  
Through this bleating baby heart.

The side is retired, two men on, game over.  
I want to tell you not to worry,  
It's still only April, there are months to play.

But it is as if you don't even care,  
You are somewhere else, you are not yet here..  
Whatever you see, whatever you think  
Is beyond me, outside, as unknowable  
As the invisible stirring of the worm  
In its bag, that one day will step out  
And have limbs and wings and everything,  
Will talk and have remarkable opinions,

Too late for me, though, a spectator  
Who misplaced his program, open-mouthed  
And blinking, but as good as dead,  
And never knew what hit me.

Look at you, Jonathan, little nag,  
Three weeks old and still not found  
Anything you like in this world  
Except lying on your back on my lap  
On the swing under tree that spreads  
Above you like a firework of green

And the light breaking through  
In diamond peeks. Your eyes jerk  
From rim to rim like a drunk on a train,  
Your legs heavy and useless  
Like bread soaked with dew.

Children because they are so alive  
Spell death to every thing.

Mysterious man, mess-making machine,  
Render of night and enemy of art,  
Nothing comes. You cry, we rock,  
The wet of your diaper like tears.

The weeks I spend attending to you are like  
An old woman pouring liquid from the jar  
Of her life into your plastic cup.

How I wish you would smile at me,  
Though it be only a muscular accident,  
I would write you a check from a secret account

That would wipe me out. I would pay to be  
Your baby mind, set high in the tree by that evil  
Mother in the lullabye song,

We would follow the motion  
Of branch against twig against spinning sky  
Where all is revealed in the rockabye  
White blind beam  
Of love.

## *REMAINDERS*

Copies of my poems went on sale at Odegard Books,  
The precise word is remaindered,  
Marked down from three ninety five to just the ninety five,  
And it hit me that this gambit by the bookstore  
Was just what people had been waiting for.

Sure, you expect people to hold back,  
Especially at today's prices. Three ninety five is  
A piece of change, no doubt about it,  
And there must be people who thumb the book  
And pat it with one hand as if weighing the  
Poems against the expense, the expense against  
The poems, take one step toward the cashier  
And then fail in their purpose, put the book back  
In the rack, and pick up a copy of American Poetry Review,  
Beautiful things wonderfully said,  
For under three dollars, a wonderful buy, instead.

But who could balk at ninety five cents,  
Why, that's less than a dollar with a nickel left over,  
You could buy the poems and have enough to  
Handle the sales tax, nineteen for the poet and  
One for the State of Minnesota and its beautiful  
Forests and waterfowl.

[Actually, all nineteen don't go to the poet. I was  
Promised a ten percent royalty, which meant forty cents  
On the full price, and the fine print here says  
When a book goes remainder there isn't really  
Any royalty at all, but I don't care, I didn't  
Write them for the forty cents, you see,  
I wrote them for this feeling I'm having right now

Of breaking through, of getting out,  
Of seeing the birds I'd stored in the box  
Fly out of it, white wings fair  
clapping the morning air.]

Ninety five cents for thirty five poems,  
That's less than three pennies apiece. Here's one  
About some weeds growing in sidewalk cracks,  
So what, it's only six lines long but at three cents  
Who's going to complain? Here's another,  
A beautiful lyric, a love poem connecting  
To the Italian futurist movement of the nineteen-teens,  
It was published in a number of respected magazines,  
For less than three cents you won't need a vacation tour  
This year, just read the words and feel their awful power.

Or the final poem, I call it "The Light," which was all  
My life in sonnet length, how there were things  
I thought I always wanted, but when I got them they were  
Different, or I was unable to recognize them -- such pathos  
As would melt the stony heart, and I lay it all down  
For you, vulnerable, small, the shattered clown,

The paper trembles with the grief of truth,  
Because here it is, softcover renascence,  
And all it costs is three lousy cents.  
My ear to the ground I can detect the build  
Of momentum, people swearing off bad habits forever,  
People afraid to look one another in the eye  
Now looking and seeing the pain and love that had been there  
All along, now reaching out, fingertips touching,  
The sting of tears collecting in the corners  
Of millions and thousands, the soft collapse  
Of a hundred brittle barriers of reason and attitude

Finally available, the incandescent word  
At prices the masses can afford.

Let us go now, you and I, to Odegards.  
For life has many sales but few true bargains.  
Let us take the silver coins and hand them to the person  
And remember to ask for the receipt, if you're a poet  
Your whole life is deductible.  
Oh daughters of Homer gather round his knees  
And hear him sing his saltstrong songs.  
There are myriad of you there,  
A speckled galaxy of brave little lights,  
Fresh washed garments tucked under your knees,  
Eager for instruction and keen for meaning,  
He cannot see you but he hears you breathing.

## *SLEEPING ON MY HANDS*

I sleep on my hands every night.  
As I pull the covers around me  
and prepare to let go,  
first on my right side,  
then on my left,  
I bunch both hands under the pillows,  
holding my head up through the night.

My head must need to be held up so,  
but I cannot do otherwise, they go there on their own.  
And in the morning when I awake  
the stems of my wrists are sore and hollow  
and my fingers numb and cold  
and I feel I have been flat on a cot  
donating blood all night.

Possibly my hands were intertwined so  
in the drift and brine of my mother's womb,  
the twist of zero gravity  
for wet weeks on end.  
Perhaps I am atoning for numerous crimes,  
and my hands after every day of greedy indignities  
need this anchor of head to clasp them in prayer.

Maybe my head is made so heavy  
by the ordeal of ordinary living  
that only my hands can prevent its sinking  
forever in mattress like a black hole of gristle,  
bone against wrist against skull against mind  
clawing to learn who it is that I am

as if I am taken down from the cross nightly,

and set on my side in the darkness to rest  
and dream of the wounds in my palms and my heart  
bearing the sins of the world in my bones,  
diving sideways into time.

## *TO A SQUID*

I bought squid as a lark,  
imagining it fun  
to eat the unusual thing.  
But a squid is no lark  
and no lark is a squid.  
These flapping things beside you  
are not wings  
never mind the cellophane feather  
upright in this flightless body stem  
that melts in the buttery brush of day.  
No lark clutches a single tooth  
in the heart of its tongue  
like a diamond stylus,  
or oozes transparent goo  
from neck like jellied snow.  
This creature never perched  
on telephone line  
or the treetop of the pear,  
nor soared above a frenzied field,  
zombie eye alighting at  
the golden hint of seed.  
Pulled ass-first through waters  
inkier than tears,  
hands trailing as if pleading  
for someone to stop me, stop me  
before I kill again,  
and these suckered lavender  
limbs reach out, brainless,  
impelled only by the passion to swallow,  
draw in our intended to  
the paper-punch kiss.  
Gray arrow, glue mitten, ten armed

bandits of the shoal, eater of mackerel  
and scavenger of mud,  
regal bird we never were.  
The Lord God of the high and the deep  
blesses us in fire.  
Savory beyond all our liabilities,  
in clove and crumb we hiss and roll.

## *THE BALLOONS*

On my daughter's four-month anniversary,  
I buy a dozen helium balloons  
at a toy shop,  
red  
yellow  
green  
blue,  
and stuff them in the back seat  
of the VW.  
But the day is warm, and I  
forgetfully  
open the passenger window  
to let in air,  
and as I accelerate up a hill,  
I can't prevent them from bobbling out,  
one after another,  
crowding one another  
like terrified tourists.  
Pulling over by the side of the street  
I watch them fight their way up  
over the treetops and wires,  
red  
yellow  
green  
blue,  
out of reach  
before I can catch them,  
gone into sky like the years  
of a little girl's life.

## *OLD SAW*

Out walking with Red, we came upon  
an ancient cottonwood tree, standing like  
a giant fork in the forest.

Into that fork another tree had fallen,  
so that the original cottonwood stood straight  
while the dead fallen tree leaned into its crux,  
and every breeze made the live tree groan  
as the dead trunk rubbed against it,  
it was the sound of a balloon roughly handled,  
or metal failing underwater,  
like a natural cello's lowest string  
rubbed raw of its rosin.

Eventually the dead tree had worked a groove  
in the crotch of the live one,  
and with the passage of time was wearing its way  
downward, splitting it down the middle.  
One main limb of the live tree had died,  
and owls and birds and other things  
had made their apartments in the soft dry flesh.

Rachel and I stared up at this natural saw  
and we took one another's hands instinctively  
as if to assure ourselves  
that the rubbing of one life against another life  
was a warming thing always  
and loving had no price.

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