

Bruce Sager

The
Song
Thief



Recent Poems

More or Less

The Song Thief

ITS NATURE

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TO MY READER, MY LOVE:

Its nature

It is fragile.

It can be lost to wine
or an untimely guest.

It can founder
in the looking glass.

It can drown
in the sea of itself,
in the swamp
of its own pits.

It can start well
yet go astray.

It can
end well
yet never
be read.

The poem
is finished
when you
turn away.

PART ONE  FACTS OF LIFE

Bigamy

It came to us long after the fact, even as oil spilled on the waters can travel the ocean for years, for many hundreds of nautical miles, or rise decades later from many fathoms below. It came to us first through a mazy small voice on the other end of the line asking if he were still alive, our father, who was not, though still alive in someone's mind, and ours. The voice sought answers, but gently, coiling, with hesitations, not out of loathing or bitterness but out of a thirst, a need to know. It had no hunger to strike. It spread across our understanding with soft intent, like a field of serous emeralds that on an imaging screen unmasks a cancer. We could not separate what the voice knew, what it should not have known, from what we knew.

The voice sounded curiously like our own. It chased us to old drawers filled with sparkling things, bits of cloth, a notebook with cryptic markings. In his hand, his deliberate hand. It chased us to two photos that had never made sense to us. It was frame-wrecking, a discourse on love, a summation of the great books. It was like a snake, not just the notion of a snake, but a real snake curled on the rug, in your bed, nesting in an impossible place.

It slithered with the fluid contours of love, but a different message than that of the scriptural snake, the killing snake, the imperial snake in its emerald glory, it was a message like oil on the waters, yet filled with the fluid contours of love. The fluid contours of love, atomized.

Picking the right suit for his funeral

This one? This is the suit my father wore to his last job interview.
He had founded small companies, he had made millions,
and lost them, and this is the suit he wore
when he interviewed with a twenty-something
who had better things to do with his time than review the resume
of a man nearing seventy.
This is the hat he would have held in his hands
talking to the twenty-something who thought my father
wasn't good enough
to be so much as a stocker of groceries, an inventory man.
Maybe twenty-six.
And maybe right maybe that wasn't the job for my father.
We'll never know.
But the suit is wrong, for sure. No sense being buried
in sour aspirations.

And this one. This is the suit my father wore to my last wedding.
I'm pretty sure this is the one. Maybe he wore it
to the one before that as well.
It isn't like he kept the table tents in a hidden pocket
to enable a quick ID.
But he liked this one, I think its hard blue background
and soft thin blue striping
spelt out something celebratory in his mind
the subtle stripe the wisp of ardor
that every wedding deserves, subsumed, yes, but not yet swallowed

by the daily grind of marital griefs, that prodigious boredom
suggested by the field of solid blue.
His sense of humor was like that light blue stripe,
refined, dancing in the background.
And I think this hard white nothing is just a trace
of wedding cake on his lapel,
the only sugar left from that marriage. But a celebratory suit
is too trifling, too slight to be a forever suit.

Or this one. This is the suit my father wore when my brother died.
So, in a sense, beyond being funereal, it is already a funeral suit.
It has experience.
At first blush, you have to admit, there is a certain symmetry
in its choosing.
It is solid and sensible and black. But it is soft, too, and stained.
All of his suits are stained
with something. The stains add up to a life. Scars do the same.
So I guess this one will do. A shroud would do. Pajamas
would do, what does it matter?
Bury me naked in a plain box when my time comes.
Bury me in jeans and a white tee.
Let the devil think some biker has arrived. Roll a pack of Luckies
into the sleeve of my tee.
That would be rich, since I never biked. Or smoked.
I swear I'd go to great lengths to fool the devil,
if there were just a devil to fool.

First Saturdays

On the first Saturday of every month
he would summon us to the kitchen,
my older brother first, then me,
the linoleum tile already fitted out
with a used white bath towel
defending the floor for the occasion

and I would stand on that towel
in the small scattering of my brother's curls
stripped to my t-shirt and shorts
and look past his doe brown eyes
and the soft hairs on his ears

as he took a pair of sewing scissors
and a straight razor vintage WWII
and brutally sheared back whatever progress
my scalp had made since his last attack.

He said it saved the family money,
and money don't grow on trees.

It was quick, at least, speed is a mercy
in mortification, it took him no more
than six minutes to get through it,
though the teasings I took

in the schoolyard for my explosive
choleric jutting hair would cut
much longer, longer than the school
year, longer than my first marriage,
my second, children, jobs, longer than
the end of his life, outlasting even
this untamed bruised defiant line
that both confesses and consults the past.

Brains enough

If I were a woman,
I'd wish for casual beauty,
brains enough to hide it,
breasts tipped like two pink eyes
looking heavenward towards
the eyes of god.

I'd wish for a man
whose hand is never a hammer.

I'd wish for a man between
sessions of love so hot
Apollo would sweat who'd
break me up, who'd choke me
with laughter.

I'd wish for the impossible:
for love, for heat
to last.

And when it cooled,
a forest. I'd wish for a forest
spread so far beyond our lawns
that when I wandered into it
no one could find me, ever.

I'd bury myself in leaves
and live on bird's eggs, on berries.
Years might pass.

When I'd had enough
I'd show up at home, at midnight.

You know what I want, I'd say.
And he'd know. By Christ,
he'd know.

Hell

*Hell. It's where the devil lives.
The devil lives in the details.*

It's nothing that would kill a soul,
just the slow drip of a bad cold,
just the slow drip of a bad boss,
it's biting the inside of your cheek,
shit on the shoe, piss on the seat.
It's writing a check out to the ex.
A frozen screen, a frosted wife,
it's where the devil forks a life.
Hell is a meter about to expire.
Hell is two pimples before the prom,
two inches left of your dental floss,
the ding of a cell phone during sex,
it's orange hair and a nuclear bomb.
Hell is the reddest part of the fire.
In certain hands it's piano wire.
Hell is the Century of Inventions.
Hell is a rogue shaved with good
intentions. Hell is a mullet. Hell is
a rearview of red and blues, booze
on the breath and a missing wallet.
Tailgaters, line jumpers, louts and
loons, liars, losels, mutton shunters,
it's unguarded sneezes, misplaced
passwords, roadside cameras,
check-out chatters, ninnyhammers,
nitpickers, ninnies and nits. Hell
is something wrong with your starter,
a stocking run, professional martyrs,
blowhards, racists, pimps, poltroons,
the silent treatment, movie talkers,

it's thirty years of Johnny Carson,
public toilets insisting on change
and not a penny on your person,
not a farthing to your name.
Expresso. Supposably. Very unique.
Pilates sessions six times a week.
Ur on. Ur off. Ur lookin gr8.
It's drop down menus state by state.
It's bloody boogers in library books.
It's eating whatever your other cooks.
It's getting old. It's losing your looks.
It's getting up, not feeling great,
hardening arteries, softening bones,
hell is a swerve to your skeleton,
it's three calls lighting up your phone
 one from a lawyer with ugly news,
one from a lover who has the blues,
one from a douche at Microsoft,
his accent thick as pepper soup.
Hell is offers you can't refuse. Hell
is a three-headed dog at the gate.
Hell is the chance to obliterate.
It's a leaden foot and a golden shower.
Hell is the sudden loss of power.
Hell is a promise, a broken truce,
it's all of whatever has broken loose.
Hell is a marriage off the rails.
Hell is a bucket of coffin nails.
It's what it feels like when you lose.
Hell is exactly the hell you choose.

Row Row Row Your Boat

Six times nine is fifty-four he said.
He held up the card with the numbers on it.
Six times nine is fifty-four she said.

He said seven times six is forty-two.
She looked at the card and said the words.
Then he asked her six times nine. Again.

And she frowned. She said fifty-six, no,
it's forty-four, wait, it's forty-two
she said. She said Hold on, it's fifty-four,

and she sulked and she sighed and wiggled
in her chair. Her eyes began to fill. And
he said that it was alright, that this is the way

it's done. That it takes time. That you have to
get to know the numbers, the familiar tune
of the numbers, that once they become old friends

they sing to each other, that they make music
just for you, that at some point you can hear them
singing their songs without even listening,

that the humming goes on forever under every
thing in this world, that the numbers start
at zero and row on past Mars, past Jupiter.

Sissy onions

How earnest she was when she said it,
how natural in the saying. *Sissy onions.*

She was six or seven years old, she was years
from knowing her body, or from the body of knowing
that would put her on the shrink's couch
for the balance of her days. She was innocent
as a hurricane. She could wreck perceptions
with the durable winds of language

like a real poet. *Sissy onions, dad.*
What better descriptor for a minced acidity
slathered over the thin affluence of a Big Mac?

He laughed when she said it back then,
and when she reminded him of the phrase
thirty years later, and it swelled again
for him, this time not as a gale
but as a mild gust, a zephyr stirring
the curtains of his mind, he remembered.

He remembered her saying it that day,
he remembered laughing, he remembered
the clothing, the company, the interior of the booth,

he remembered in a flowering of cells,
a celebration. That thin, resilient memorial:
the mind. He remembered everything.
Everything, in a way. His
way. The work of memory
how memory works. Then she told him more,
she told him what she needed to tell him,
so much more

than sissy onions. How he heard
what he needed to hear. How much
she told him, and how he told himself
what he needed to say, in a language
that had no use for words, just the easy balm
of her voice. That he could hear it at all,
that stubborn echo of sissy onions,

a miracle. Common, convivial,
the kind that might occur on any day,
that faint, faint echo of all those seasons
blowing past the cursor, blinking,
blowing past the papers on his desk,
blowing past the receiver, cold and hard
and modern, held like a shell to his ear.

The portable corpse

Burn me. I've decided that's the way to go
after I've gone. Too long my sister and I
have travelled once every five years
a hundred miles each, one north,
one south, to converge in the shabby mean
corner of northeast Philadelphia
where what's left of our parents
leaches slowly into the earth.
Worm meat. Fossils. Clay. Burn me.

Scoop the ashes into a box. Nothing
overdone, just the standard box within
a box, the kind of reliquary we purchase
to keep a pet's remains. The kind
that gets stashed on the top shelf
in the back of a closet, its small plaque
engraved with a name, some dates.

Anyone can visit to say a few words
to the box when it is set like a book
or a vase on a desk, pulled out
for the occasion of someone's need
to discuss grief or happiness.

It will all be the same to me
in my rainproof haven
where the words will fall like a little shower
and finally abate. At least my children
will know where to find me, and my wife,
at last, will know where I am at all times.

Keep some locks of hair in a baggie.
Eight baggies, really, each with a sliding
lock, one for each of my seven kids,
and one for safekeeping with my beloved.

Eight baggies stashed safely
all over the globe.

That last part is important.
Let some trace of DNA remain
like a clear sky after a storm.

If ever there is a resurrection
perhaps they can get a rise,
a wild goose, out of something
paltry and wizened and white.

Vivaldi in the autumn

When you two were small, Alyssa, Jen,
you would creep into my bed on Saturday mornings
knowing that I was only pretending to snore,
feigning a metrical snooze, and you were virtuosi,
both of you, at tickling, wishing nothing more
than to be grabbed, and trapped and tucked in, tight,
to be held as no man would ever hold you again,
with such innocence, such fierce sanctuary
against this world, a coddling of bones and skin,
and your hands curled in girlish reflex into mine
and your braids blazing and light as angel hair
and your baby bodies shifting like angels flying
through the vaulted gates of a cathedral.

And then I would get up, do Daddy Breakfast,
Vivaldi or Elvis or Zeppelin in the background.

This is my quiet vote against an unyielding progress.
It is an autumn morning now, thirty years are gone,
and last night, for my birthday, my wife and I
listened to Vivaldi interpret autumn for us.
Not your mother, of course. My new wife. Niki.
Not that much older than you are now.

I thought of how far off you are, the two of you,
how far off the sacrament of those mornings.

The orchestra was small, only thirty-two strong,
but thirty-two virtuosi plying their trades.
Their music lifted them, lifted us. Like angels.

Flying.

Intermission at the Symphony

*I can't believe that someone as expressive as Tchaikovsky wasn't gay,
when I hear his music I see sugar plums, fairies, gangs of angels,
says the lady standing to our right. He was, actually, says the man
who might or might not be with her, and he thinks I wonder
if anyone here knows that I am? My wife looks at the woman, sips
her wine and smiles at me, and I know exactly what's going on
in her head: If she were ten years younger, ten pounds lighter, I'd eat her
like she's never been eaten. Shit, I'd do her anyway. My wife glances at me
to see if I know what she's got in mind, decides I do, wets her upper lip
and grins. Somewhere about thirty miles south, Tiff the babysitter
is watching TV, the babies are in their beds. Tiff. She's fifteen,
sixteen, has breasts more buttery than anyone within eyeshot,
and is totally off-limits. Give her five years I think not-out-loud,
then check my wife to see if she might be reading my mind,
but my wife is now scoping out the tall-ish man wearing his tie
open at the neck, the man in skinny jeans who would like to turn
to his angelic mistress and say flat out, You know, it just isn't worth it
anymore, I want to move to Maui and run a scuba shop. And I don't want you
along for the ride. Maybe angels are simply thoughts, invisible, flying
everywhere all at once. Maybe my wife could take off a week or two
to visit his scuba shop with ten-years-younger, ten-pounds-lighter
in tow, and the two of them could take their kids with them,
and the babysitter, too, because what in God's name good is Maui
if you're saddled with kids all day, and then, after a week or two
has stretched out into months, a year, two, three, four, five,
in about five years maybe I could fly out for a week or ten days
to say hi to the kids, hi to the happy threesome, but mostly
to check out the butter in the babysitter's breasts. To see if it's still
Grade A pure and fresh as a pail of goat's milk. Don't know
for sure if she'd be up for that, she's still a kid, God knows
what she's thinking. God. God who is flashing the lights now
or has assigned the light work to a novice angel, eager, fresh-winged
not to warn us that the sky is about to open on Sodom and Gomorrah
but to tell us that another hour of elevator music is about to begin.*

Woodstock

I wasn't there.

It was a Friday, the 15th day of August, 1969,
and I was standing by the side of a road
56 miles southwest of Max Yasgur's farm
with two tennis rackets, my steamer trunk
and a sack of laundry, waiting to be picked up
from summer camp by my parents.

I was seventeen. I waited and watched
and watched a thickening stream of traffic
headed north, I had no sense of where
they were going, open panel trucks
and painted VW minivans and old cars
filled with kids my age. I had no more
sense in me than a watch has time in it,
I was this nothing, a bag of blood and bones
the way a watch is casing of cogs and wheels,
just two hands and a predictable face.
Not much in the way of local news got to us
that summer. The traffic meant nothing to me.
I wondered what all the ruckus was about.

I had spent nine weeks teaching tennis to
ten year olds, I'd sat in the nurses' quarters
and watched men walk on the moon
not a month before. The TV was black
and white and the nurses were cute.
They were excited, they wanted to party.
I wondered what all the ruckus was about.
I went back to my bunk, I went to bed,
I was seventeen, I had all the sense
of the first draft of a first novel
written by someone who'd never
picked up a pen before. Mind you,
I had all of the gear, all of the clothing
sitting right there, roadside, every last thing
I would have needed. I had a sleeping bag.
I watched the cars and vans pass by
until my parents finally showed up.
We listened to Herb Alpert back then,
all the way back to Philadelphia. South.
So much traffic headed the other way.

Assertions

I think, therefore I know the river
is only a road, straights, curves, not unlike the imagination,
countless rounds of hydrogen and oxygen. Still, these airy
piranha are at me in the depths of night, all
over me, those rapid trillion teeth.

I think, therefore I know the skies
are one sky one sky, knitted. Yet the heavens change road
by road, the moon tacks county by county, inflected,
each blue a page, its own, a singularity, each bone-
weary, a billion years of passage.

I think, therefore I know the tree
is just a root, a vegetation, this life of leaf and branch,
conscious of light the way a clock, after a million
million minutes, might grow conscious of its gears
and the hands that depend from its gears.

I think, therefore I know this earth
is simply a ship on heavy seas, and I am a twelve-year-old
standing in the rain, waiting for the system, waiting
for a yellow bus. And now it's late again. Somehow
always late on days like these.

The prodigy

He got up early even though his parents were night owls,
so they could hear his light, naked footfalls on the stairs
advancing like dawn across their sheets. While they fought

for a last quarter hour of sleep they could hear him tinkling
steadily at the piano, working out some small notions
that had crept with the moonlight into his bed.

Every morning thus. Every morning the refrigerator door
distressing the austerity of the dark air, and the clink
of a breakfast bowl, the rattle of silver, the rooting

for cereal. And then, once again, the soft rain swell of notes
as he returned to the piano. And his temper, his temper
when they chimed at him like a clock, bringing his clothing

in their hands, his lunch pail, his worthless book bag.
Why do you trouble me with these things? I'm not going
to school today. They don't teach anything there, just talk.

All they do is bore me. Why don't you leave me alone?
He barely needed them, as the drinker outgrows the need
of a glass. Just the bottle will do. The raw swill of gin.

What to do with such a child? Maybe he will be like Mozart
they told each other. And he was. Mozart was misunderstood,
disliked, and gone too early. And there was no replacing him.

The wake

i.

The child is dead.

His sickness has gone off
to a cold storage. It is chilled, hungry
for something beyond room temperature,
needing to chew, hungry for a mass
greater than its own light weight,
the weight of the air.
But there is nothing left for it.
There is nothing there.

ii.

This is none of your business now.
You must prepare for the wake.

You wash and wash
the strawberries and the blueberries,
even the melon pieces, four times,
five, there is no end to your washing,
as if you might make berries
and melons cleaner than nature's
to the tongue, and softer,
softer than his oldest shirt.

Red and blue, purple, green, orange
turn grey under the water,
and still you scrub and scrub.

You would wash all of the color
out of the state if you could,
right off the seaboard. There is not
enough water in this world,
not enough grey.

iii.

And when you stood there
facing everyone you loved
you could not see their faces

you could not tear deeply enough
at your clothes,
they were a profanity

you needed to be naked

and cupped your breast

and it weighed a baby weight

and for a moment
it was not your breast
that you held in your hand.

iv.

There is no going forward
no going back

if only you
were a clock
if only the spring
had exhausted itself
with your hands resting
where your hands
had come
to rest

no forward
no back

just this.

Simulacra

Now it is the time of shorter hours and fuming silences

Now it is the time of the Sandhill crane, once every five years
ambling though our gardens, our lives, but a constancy
to the visits, a fidelity, something to be counted upon,
however vaguely the arrival of the Sandhill crane
looking for all the world like the sacred ibis, but gauche,
gawky, disjointed, ludicrous, pinning beyond our doors
all that we hoped to keep from sapping our brio

Now the neighbors' houses are just spotted instances of light,
invisible through the tree line during the day, beaming at night
into our trees, their windows hanging like stars in the needles

The evergreens hold their steady line as sentries might, the pale
between our property and theirs, but ornamented incongruously,
the cold small burn of stars steady as the lights in the skies

There are hours I stand in the deep dark by the brushes of the trees
and peer through to the houses beyond, and sometimes
there are people moving within, and though I am not looking
for them, yet they are there, suggesting the warm, the normal,
as a glimpse of an airplane might evoke normalcy for someone
in a jail, as a flirtation might define the unchanging for a seducer

Now is the time of the ornamental grasses, grasses that grew lush
and riotously wild last fall before going to seed in the end,
riotously wild, party wild, standing in for us, the sway
and silence of them wagging in the wind, a despondency,
all of the unhappiness of abandon. Of being abandoned

It came to a head in the late summer, this one just past, the one
that meant the end for us. But maybe not our last summer,
not just yet, for endings can be long in the coming, the undoing
of long habits longer than their making. But it is coming,
and now is the time of shorter hours and fuming silences

And this morning, the unlikely and rawboned Sandhill crane that lives
invisibly, prehistorically, very close to us, though we are neither
wetland nor marsh country, though there are no rivers or basins
in these dry hills, this morning the Sandhill crane showed up
once again to tour our gardens, to splash through our pond,
looking for all the world like the fabled sacred ibis, which, in
ancient Egypt, was a symbol. Bird of knowledge. Bird of wisdom.
But that was then. Later interpretations got closer to the point.
My point. The death of beauty, bleeding, bleeding to death.
Simulacra. I think there was more to it than that, even, I think
the real meaning went deeper, spear deep. I think it meant
bird of shame, bird of sorrow, bird of lament. Or should have

PART TWO  ANYBODY'S STORY

Vincent, my father

Nobody knew.
I was his secret.

He made me
in the little unmade bed
in Arles, two yellow pictures
staring down at him
and the woman who was
to become my mother

and their clothing discarded
in haste, in heat, his yellow
straw hat tilting madly
at the foot of the bed,
her maid's smock dangling
by one thin tie from the chair
where it landed, in their fever,
like one thrown die,
a child of chance

as I am. A child of chance.
I don't remember much else,
he was gone not long after
I came. Mother says he was tender,
that he held my face in his hands
she always says those *marvelous* hands
like sunlight. She says that. She says that
his beard tickled. That my red hair
is his.

It was an August afternoon.
Outside the sun was painting
sunflowers, August paints flowers
all over Arles.

Edison

October 21, 2015

Today marks the 136th anniversary
of the day Thomas sat back in the sweat
of Menlo Park, a eureka moment,
with a workable light bulb in front of him.

I would rather know just this and nothing else
about that moment. I would rather that bulb
brighten the frontiers of the imagination
with its own humble flame, free of the facts.

I don't want to know how many failures
preceded it. I don't want to know
what he thought it presaged. I don't care
what he was wearing, how many others
were working on the team. Keep the watts
to yourself. Leave me the warm glow
of slow human triumph, let it shine

on the cave paintings in France, upon
the odd camber of the first wheel, inspired,
perhaps, by the iris of an eye, a lover's eye,
or by the sun itself, observed only
when the eye is shaded,

let it cast shadows soft
and sensual, moving here and there
along a timeline lit mostly by candles,

let it kiss every dash and droplet falling
from the quill of Mozart, of Cervantes,

let it run like a track of dominoes
from the mouth of a cave
through Silicon Valley,

let it flare to a roar the zeroes and ones
that lie at the feet of a woman and man
squatting in the earliest dark
rubbing two sticks together.

What the magician's assistant needs

First, I need a man to sell me
to you. The very idea of me.
Let him stand in front of the theater
and take you by your lapels
as you wander home from work,
pull you into his stale breath,
push you towards the double doors
of the auditorium. Let him guide
you to me. He could be my father.

Then I need a man to sit in wonder
and wait for me, to crave so hard
that the very notion of me is enough
to set him burning. I need a man
to be my audience, to watch
for me, for my entry into
the egg-shaped spot of light,
a man to love me spotlight one leg
easing through that oval, then
my mid-section, then all of me
spilling all at once I need

a man who will take one look
at my high heels, the fishnet
on my legs, and feel it. Feel it
right here. You know where
I mean. He could be you.

And I need a man
who will do things to me
that amaze you, right before
your very eyes, things that no man
can or has the right to do.
I want him to lay me down,
to cleave me. To cut clean through.
Two halves. Clearly two. Then
I'll swing open, unguarded
as a door, a book, a melon.
The one part of me, which
you could chat with as though
nothing were amiss. And the
other, which you will love
with a schoolboy's desperation.
I need a man who can cut me
in two. Almost any man will do.

Algebra I

It's about love.

It's about loving the engineer
in the train that just left Albuquerque
doing an average of 72 miles per hour,
heading off into the sun,
heading straight for a train
that left Topeka at the same time
going an average of 81 miles per hour
driven by another engineer
you could love.

You could love that first engineer
because he has to spend the morning
squinting, and he already has a headache
from what his daughter told him
over his two eggs scrambled
just before she headed off to school.

You could love that second engineer
because he only spends whatever energy
he must keeping his train on the track,
not worrying overmuch about the train
from Albuquerque that is still hours away,
and he doesn't care exactly what time
he is going to pass that train.

He has his mind on other matters.
His lunch bag. His unsmiling wife.

The rest of the morning he thinks about
armaments from World War II.
He wonders why the Allies didn't bomb
Auschwitz. He's read the books. He's
done the math. He still doesn't buy it.

You have to love him for that alone.

The lot of stars

They have no use for watches,
calendars, their counting
is beyond us. Still,

they rot and swell and die

not so different from the small
brown mice of the forest,
sometimes littler than a thumb,
a child's thumb

which is the beginning
of mathematics, the humble
house of one.

Ithaca, an afterthought

Ten years
at Troy, ten years
upon the sea
among the islands

this was an accident,
you say? A chain
of misfortunes?

Actions scream
where notions
whimper.

The journey
was everything.

Life became a toting
of its days, took on
the shape of
battering waves.

Odysseus the Cunning?
Yes, cunning.

He made the life
he wanted to live.

He went where
he wanted to go.

The stars were clear
as the lines on a map.
And he was clever.

The seas were not
so vast. He could
have made a run
for it, he could
have made it home
one night's sail
under a clear sky,
done business.

Poseidon would have
looked away.
Anger recedes.
Poseidon would
have relented.

But a god can read
a human heart
the mercy was
in no mercy.
No happy
concession.

Poseidon gave him
only what
he wanted the gift
of odyssey.

Ithaca could wait,
his wife could wait.

For what
were Penelope's
withering paps
to the durable breasts
of the Sirens?

What was her fidelity
against the faithful clap
of rock and sea,
the enduring lust
of Calypso, Circe's
ferocious mouth?

A witch can tame
a human heart.

Of quest or desire,
quest. The greater
hunger.

The journey
is everything.

The destination,
the known thing,
no thing.

The Haves of Exton, Pennsylvania

Much of the historic district and
South Philadelphia are submerged . . .
the Delaware swells to five miles wide.

"What Could Disappear"
THE NEW YORK TIMES

The spires of Center City reflect the waves
Two hundred feet below. The albacore
Amid the soggy ruins of have-nots, haves
Abound here, forty miles off the shore,
Along the corals of the twentieth floor.
Far to the west a broken Atlantic breeze
Rolls over the shores of Exton and retreats.

A rangy father sifts the strand for shells.
A wilted mother lounges on her chaise.
A heated day a hotter night foretells:
The new world is a kind of paraphrase.
Trees and grasses glister in the haze.
This new world a restatement of the old,
But altered: Ides of March: it is not cold.

Two sisters, playing hopscotch, play along,
Oblivious to paraphrase; the sea
Which never stays in one place for too long
Never varies, either. One skins a knee
But rises tearless. Older, it is she
Who sets the touchstone for the littler one,
And squints untroubled at the setting sun.

Jack's ploy

So maybe his crown
wasn't broken
at all. Maybe
he was just
shaken a bit,
or maybe he
stumbled
on purpose

feigning crown
breakage
so that Jill
would come tumbling
the delicate corpus of her
the enormously desired
the indefatigably untouched
the as yet unthickened
laughing and grass stained
mass of her
all at once
into his clever arms.

And can you blame him?
you, who've lived
long enough
to be reading
this, and so understand
the arid palate,
the aching network
of tongue and chest,
who recognize
naked yearning....

Is it ever so pure
and pedestrian
as mere water,

this need to go up
the hill, this urge
to fetch

and then
to fall?

Sitzpinkler

*Old German term
typically referring
to a man who sits
to urinate.*

Some stand to pray,
some kneel.

Some vote their conscience,
some their purse.

Some stand
for their machismo.

Some squat
to pee. Efficiency.

Some take pride
in their aim.

Some aim to cleanse
their pride.

Some are simply tired
of it, tired of it all,

and take the occasion
to ease their burden

to relieve the insistent
weight of this world.

What goes around

Perhaps you have a friend
whose calls you do not take.

Just the sight of her name
on your phone
incites a minor crisis, a flurry
of avoidance, causing you to suffer
a) a distemper,
b) the scorn of self-reproach,
c) the concession of guilt –
all because you cannot bear her voice.

Perhaps you have another friend,
one who does the same with yours.

Perhaps he tires of your petty carps, the way
you make the mud on your tires
into the sludge of this world.

Sometimes they might call each other
and bypass you entirely.

The world rolls on
with or without you.

The trucks tote their stores
of garbage across the globe, ships
sail, suns shine, bees buzz, words fly
like hummingbirds along the wires
while you are humming softly
to yourself.

The racket the butterfly makes

There's the brush
of the mushroom
through the loam at night,
and the coal hardening
into something precious,
so noisy if you're
attuned to the tongue,
and a woman escaping
into a cell phone
a thousand miles away,
whispering so as not
to wake the kids,
and though
it's not you
she's whispering to,
still you hear
as you hear
the harsh settling
of the dust
on a light bulb,
the gush of an apple
growing, the clacking
of the tadpole's valves,
the thunder of sunlight
on each grain, the
mantis mandibles
crashing shut
anybody's call
what language
is calling to you
at any given moment,
and the stories
they have to tell
are naked, brash,
are anybody's story.