

## 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.

## 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.

## 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 what six times nine is.

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.

## 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.

## 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.

## Poetry lesson

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

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

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

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

## 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.

## 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.

## 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.

## 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 hanging  
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.

## 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 glisten 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.

## Come to me, says the earth

and the acorn listens.  
The sparrow listens. The fallen  
senator. The leather sole.

Come to me, says the sun,  
and Earth listens. Jupiter.  
Mars, in its war paints. Saturn.

When will I learn such gravity?

The continents long for each other  
at two centimeters per year.  
Two. Toenail speed.

Mountains rise more slowly still,  
parsing time in millimeters: the rim  
of a penny; nine sheets of paper.

When will I learn such patience?

## The sea

Shovel for paddle,  
grass in waves, fish in ponds,  
the seaweed of daisy and thistle,  
the tulips startle and descend,  
the starfish of the risen rose,  
the hollies whales of green,  
the three wheels of my little boat  
as I set out to sea.

## Song in the garden

In the oldest part of our garden  
I plant our newest bush. It will bear black  
and blue berries in two years, maybe three,  
delicious berries, though the first growth  
will be bitter as a letter of farewell.  
It has been many years.  
I can still taste those words in my mouth.

## Tulips

Tulips rise early, the poster children  
of industry. Well-mannered, round-  
shouldered and orderly. How seductive  
their flexible beauties. They tempt us  
outside, into the early spring weathers.  
And then the wind rises and lifts us  
unawares into the plot of the cold day.

## Roses

The bush resists my efforts  
to strip its glories. "*These  
are my finest flowers, they come  
with a price.*" A thorn finds  
some skin just past the top  
of my garden glove. It bites,  
I leak. One thick pearl.  
I wipe away the red with  
a leaf, and drop the smear  
on the dark mulch. You  
cannot escape the truth. You,  
too, are a part of this earth.

## Flower

It asks nothing, forces nothing.  
This is the truth of the garden.  
If you were to fall before it, wailing,  
world-weary, a supplicant, if you  
were to pour out your hungers,  
it would take more interest  
in the bee vibrating beside you.  
The bee that does not see you  
the way you see yourself. The bee  
that sees you only for what you  
are. One part of the garden.

## Angels

The leaves are angels,  
messengers. They have come  
in batches, in robes of scent  
and hue, great sums of angels.  
Like bells making a silence.  
Autumn on each tongue.

## Trees fringing the garden

The more gnarled the most beautiful.  
Their lines are convoluted as lives.

If they had voices, their verbs  
would be slow, their nouns deep.  
Still, they speak among themselves,  
root to root, sugar talk.

They are proper and posh,  
immune to the seasons,  
bark and leaf are worn  
as a proud corona.

They look down upon  
the unruly carpet at their feet  
and tsk into the wind.  
They wish for a floor of needles.

How they, not *pity*;  
exactly, but *savvy*  
the annuals their lot,  
their brevity. How  
they would lecture,  
if they could, the springtime's  
foolish wash of flower,

flowers delighting  
in form and color  
as if some blush might buy  
a few extra weeks  
or beauty stall  
their slide into the dirt.

How they would scold,  
like the leaf mold.

Their lives, ours,  
inching at the speed  
of root, elaborate  
as branches. Twined.  
They breathe out  
what we breathe in.

I don't think they can see us,  
so tenuous our connection  
to this earth, and theirs so deep.

But they remember the ills  
we've done them. No unringing  
that bell. There are no  
untwisted among us.

## Italy

In a marriage, if you sit still long enough, something will go wrong. It could be you, it could be she. It could be someone who looks at her when you're not looking, and she barely feels it at first, like the wind on a Maui morning, when what you notice is the sunshine, but still, the wind is there. Always. Almost always.

In Italy, if you sit still long enough, someone will bring you a bowl of olives. Which sounds pleasant enough. But the problem is, she might be beautiful, more beautiful even than the olives, the promise an olive makes to the tongue, and life is already complicated. Always.

## What flowers

A man and a woman sit in two chairs, facing each other. What was slender once has grown fat. What was curly and bushy, straight and thin. It is quiet. Sometimes they look into each other's eyes, silent and unrepenting, but most times they look past each other, studying the paint on the bare walls as though the paint were a text. Or a context. If it is a room they are sitting in, the air is still. If a stage, there is no audience, just people drifting here or there, in and out, for a moment. Sometimes someone vaults onto the stage to bestow a kiss on the man or the woman. And fades away. As a scar fades. Never fully. As a place where there was wreckage on a road is marked, sometimes. Flowers.

## You ask me for a poem about love

You ask me for a poem about love as if this were the acid test of love, the way sweeping a floor in your bare feet is the acid test of sweeping. The way you ask a pharmacist for a pill, and an hour later she hands you a vial.

But you don't want a metaphor. You want a poem about married love. Good, hard and true.

And all I can tell you is, this is the hardest kind of poem. This is the hardest kind of love.

## Question

If your life were a balcony would you be standing on it or below it? is what she asked me and she was playing with her hair twirling the strands, twirling, and from time to time she would reach out and touch my arm where the sleeve of the tee cut right across my bicep and once she pressed my hand while she was making a point and her voice dropped below all of the other voices at that party when for a moment she murmured something about her husband and her long married eyes held my long married eyes and my life was a balcony and I was swinging somewhere outside of it from a night tree.

## Why I like fast cars

I like fast cars with bald tires because they're like a marriage always on the rocks. You never know what might happen next. I like the two girdling white lines that run on forever, cross at your own risk. Like a marriage. I like the way the lines and curves recall, for me, the essence of defiance, daring all the skill in the blood to press on a little harder. That's what it's like to be alive, really alive, to feel the blood in your ears, a quickening not unlike what you feel when she says Sit down. We have to talk.

## Simple chat

Her question was about my past. I was the world expert on this subject, I could paint whatever I wished to on that canvas. I swirled my bourbon, a sweet rot. The ice had softened to translucence, slush on top, berg beneath. So much under the surface. I felt its weight across the bottom, and she sensed it, of course, filling all the rest of that ample glass.

## First date

There was still the pleasure of peach on my tongue with its little dab of vanilla cream

as she excused herself from the table and went to the ladies' room and never returned.



## When it got too cold

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

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

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

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

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

## 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, losers, 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.  
*Espresso. 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.

## 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.

## What I kept

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Evening song

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

DONNE (HOLY SONNET XIV)

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

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

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

*O Nameless, again, forgive this exhausted diction!  
The language is pooped save the hand of an unborn poet.  
Words serve to scar the hide of sentiment,  
to mar it past all recognition, blotched, blobbed,  
blotted and scorched, bowed as an antique crone  
and gussied like a lemon from Earl Scheib;*

*my Bic is drear, my dick is drab, the very  
essence of a scab, dry as a dead goose feather.*

*Deliquesced & over & out. Our Father  
who art, our Momma who ain't, it's a One-Note Duo  
won't slip their son a Jackson now and then.*

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

*So now perhaps do you get it, Daddy-o?  
A drop of down to go with my elation.*

*Words tamp the earnest supplicant, block  
his stride but ten lengths from the ribbon.*

*The rocks shift as you hop about the stream.  
Wilderness grows around the machete's blade  
even as its metal cleaves the air. The whole deal's  
screwed beyond repair. You've stolen the ticket  
and torn up the map to the station.*

Shatter this ear and nose, this eye and tongue  
as a glass will ring beneath the uncallused foot  
of some jaded stuffed shirt-to-come; and grind it, down  
and deep and dear, grind it into the spindrift soot  
all sullied and galed with fathers let the furies rip  
with a chaste connubial kiss. Bend to my withers,  
I'll bend at the knee, commend us all with a whip  
and a word to the walloping wind; make featureless,  
Nameless, the face and fortune of the bride, her  
snaggled incisors after a time failing her smile,  
her silver halides buried back by the dollar bin

where forebears in albums fade beyond their names;  
make high and operable only this yearn of a pity  
pivoting on its wing, baffled, droll, an angel stalled,  
an airship dropped to one knee over the city . . .

*Sputtering, a deadly dull machine . . . ?*

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

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

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

## You are as ready as you have ever been

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

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

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

What language  
would please its ear?

## Angels tire

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

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

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

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

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

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

Is this the place where I acknowledge  
my editor and my proofreader?  
All mistakes are theirs and theirs alone.  
I would like to thank God  
that I am an agnostic.  
And if you have a problem with that,  
then go petition the District Judge.

Go see who's sitting on that bench.

## The end

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

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

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

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