

Perishables

They shall be thanked for their softness,
Just as these fingers shall be
when they are steep with light,
Just as the feet shall be
for their tripping and sliding.

And the moon, too, shall be thanked, for its changes.

And the engines of airplanes that roar toward sleep
on the edges of that changing light,
And sleep for the rest it gives
When we are broken by the wakefulness of thought,
the weight of addition.

Just as the horror of my mother's face shall be thanked
when she takes her teeth out.

And the heat shall be thanked, for rising.

And I shall thank the cold for coming down,
And the zero shall be thanked
for subtracting nothing.

And someone will be there to assist me in this.

And he shall help me thank the hollow of a band shell
for its wet face.

And he shall help me thank the voice of a man
who clears his throat in the morning,

And the insect the amateur entomologist pries open,
And the instruments of the entomologist's fingers.

And he will be standing there and he will be my grandfather.

And there will dirt upon his overalls and his gray cap,
And he will tell me what comes, and what comes after,
And he will thank the hands of the pitcher plants
for their syrupy fingers,
And the steeple of the bittern's face when it glances upwards,
and we shall do this together.

And then one day he will not be standing.

And the morning will be there in his place
And it will make the world loud with its twitterings
And I will not be fond of its loudness,
I will want the night to close, like a dog's coat,
sleek and Labrador,
And I shall want to come undone, like the laces of a shoe,
before the night is over.

But I shall not come undone, though I should like to.

And I shall seat him on a stump among the elms by the creek,
And I will make it hard to see him because the wind has risen
and the air is dusty.

So I shall imagine him there, chewing on something.

And his hands shall be busy fixing a footstool
And when he is done he will put his feet up
And there will be mud and stickers on his boots
And he shall point to the clouds that circle above us
And he shall tell me about the clash of ions in the air.

And I shall be so happy I shall thank the dirt on my fingers.

I shall thank the turnip for drawing color from the earth,
And I shall take this color into my mouth and match it
 with my tongue,
And it will be like kissing my grandfather,
 like putting my hand in his.

And we shall take a little plastic boat across the creek,
And we shall share a 7-UP because we are thirsty
 and there will be shade on the water
And all sorts of bugs shall be flying this way and that.

And a heron also shall be walking in the mud at the creek's edge.

And we shall thank the heron's stillness when we are near
 because it is the stillness of the mind,
And we shall thank its soft retreat when we approach
 because it is the mind's movement.

And I shall take the halo from its right eye
 and slip it on my finger,
And it will be like marrying my grandfather,
 like going down the aisle together.

And I shall take the halo from its left eye and save it for later.

And the right eye shall be used to rebuild
 the face of my grandfather.

And I shall return the oil to his skin, the part to his hair,
And he will be young again and we will be standing there.

And then I will give him back the halo I have saved for later.

And we will use it to look at the book we have brought to look at.

And the book will be filled with the reproductions
of great paintings.

And there will be blood in the paintings, and a yellow light.

And an essay will tell us which of the colors have faded
And which have been cleansed and returned to brightness.

Night

Night is holiday. Is sister early. Wrapping and surprise.

Like these athletic carnations

pinned to my shirt:

a wonderland pharmacy.

Sometimes I look at the clouds and I am full of that reaching,

beyond that charity,

a man pursued into a ritual of color,

an obscurantist.

Once I saw a picture of a cockatiel

upon a one-eyed dancer's shoulder,

bright as the lamp he carried with him,

a perfect speck of blindness and vision.

Remember, how I showed you, there beside the pond,

beneath the corrugations, the blue

underwater glow, late evening,

the silk swaying above us,

the tint of my way forward?

Poetry, you said, when you were smooth as endless,

unimprovable summer,

and I was shiny as the inside of a shell turned outwards

for everyone to see.

As To The Tangerine

What opened
must have closed
around the light
it fed on.

And the light, somehow,
must have multiplied within
as the fruit, incremental, swelled
toward its own undoing.

Ripeness is like that.

It is how the world deceives us.

What I consume
is an interruption.

What I reap
is brightness,
unsevered, sweet

Spiritus Mundi

One man said it was love, another, suffering. And the wind
once had its own idea, about direction in the end of august,
as did the fire, when it was seeking increase, and the face
of the water, which was smiling. A book I read once
said it's like delight, a suddenness of thought
with the warmth of the body in it, a waitress
in a pink nostalgia, though the waitress at The House of Pies
says it's an apron pocket bleached a perfect white
with a small cherry stain in the corner – too little
sweetness at the edge of winter. I used to wonder at it
and I still do, but years ago, alone and dying, my father
said it was the childlike impulse inside him that wanted
to show his mother what he'd made. It was that simple.
Towards the end, what he called his climactic time,
he compared himself to the sea, or if he was
in a fresh-water mood, Lake Ontario, because
he was fond of his deeps and shallows,
the surge of white foam that is glad to draw
a part of the world back to itself. The other day
I dreamed of him, clearing his throat like a man at a wedding
who had never wanted silence before, and he said my name.
I remember him now, for everyone who never met him.
He used to tell me there were two rivers in the palm
neither of which the hand could close on.
So when he died, out of respect, mind you,
I buried him with both hands empty.

Once Grief Has Entered

A pulse, you said.

Liminal. Braided.

As in that maple where the meadow lifts,
its full crown like the halo of a flare,
a mean of interbranching light
in a floating share of brown and green,
luminescent, motional.

Or that autumn outside Albany
when the trees opened
and the pond emerged
from the scratchy shadows
bright as resin.

Strange, isn't it, what sometimes hurts us.

The heron, blue and great and passing far above,
so slow and graceful it is not flight
but the sheer gentleness of air,
as it eases its way down to the willows.

How it arches its wings
and lifts for a moment,
almost weightless,
before it touches down.

Ghost Month

As if the others weren't also.

As if the moon, assuming a particular disposition, a certain aptitude,

were the only measure.

As when the crabs, bloated with life, quicken their way to the beach-height,

that bed of split-straw and seaweed,

to dig and scrawl,

beyond the day's warmth,

to the dark-wet depository

their instinct demands.

As if March were a breathing mouth and not a lamp

baring the way upward.

Or August browning nonetheless under the early rains.

For you, we say, this bowl of basil.

Champagne grapes upon their scaffold.

This white crane creased by the earnest.

What is it you seek but wonderment and delicious trouble?

That wooden stool with its finish worn bare?

The light that responds to the sound of our voices?

Take this house we burn it for you.

Can you see your grandson in the door?

The car with its wheels

turned toward the curb to stop it from rolling?

Do not be saddened by the sudden decline of the pocket harmonica.

By the speed-wash setting on the digital machine.

Take joy in the smoke the world smoke it rises.

The night-market with its oils and cutlets.

Know that you are our recurring occasion.

That this is the expression of your coming.

That we have dug a hole and filled it

with sawdust and pitch

and set it afire and called it our longing.

That we have made ourselves into earthlight and season.

That we carry you forward into our changing.

And shall keep so till our wide-time is done.

The Twelve

1. It was his love poem.
2. To multiply the mass of the heart
by the speed of the light that flows through it.
3. That he might outpace his own appearance and meaning.
4. So the familiar might mature into obscurity,
the day grow toward an occult estrangement.
5. To make of himself another swiftness.
6. A blur in the flush of the unattended orchard.
7. So he could spend his afternoons exploring
finitude among the many rushes of the breath.
8. The windrows of sunflowers, oysters, chick peas, reeds.
9. Blending the oils of the skin.
10. Spiriting fresh sprigs of saffron and rose
to flavor his hair.
11. The nick of briar, largesse of departure.
12. It was this human feeling he wanted.
12. Fire ants emerging from the wet nostrils of a dying lamb.
12. The fields ablaze with the morning returning.

Television

You need it this other life.

You need its leotard and muscle its bang

And smatter its preening detective.

You need its triplicate its nurse.

You need its special.

What would the darkness be without its invisible accent without

its register its pipe its current its goof its liquid and crystal

its ridge of white feathers.

What you want is exclusion is wardrobe emergency.

Is tryst and purse the fat scent of lilacs

stomp and patter.

All day long you do what you do

Not want to get

What you need.

And what you need is this:

cartoon and vampire and virus travel. Catch and repair.

The hectic report of malevolent weather.

Nietzsche in the Villa Silberblick, July, 1900

Some god came kicking horses in his dream by the sea.
The charred ruins of a farm smoldered on the bleak hill.
Teenage girls circled the mall at night, their headlights
Climbing the walls like moonspot.
Bored vacationers slept in caskets of fluorescent light.
He bought a coat the color of the Baltic Sea
From a thrift shop called *The Blue Anchor*
Where the cashier, faded as a vintage jumpsuit,
Miscalculated the taxes. Outside on the street,
Fronted by block-wide windows a story tall,
He heard the pronouncement: *People's lives are like libraries built
Without calculating the weight of books.*
Everything shimmered like a pointillist masterpiece.
This is the bold time I foresaw, he thought,
Then braved himself back to waking,
Where a young nurse, dressed in the innocence of her degree,
Helped him to a chair.
Oh my, she whispered, as she changed the sheets,
Drenched from the sleep-work of his dream.

Little League

When I was ten, playing baseball for one of those leagues where the teams
are sponsored by banks and beer distributors
and the colors seem, repetitively, Celtic green, though not, I think, some sly,
symbolic invocation of ancestral pride
but simply a bright and pretty color--

our pitcher, Bobby, I will call him, southpaw, black, his fastball tailing away
from so much righthandedness, was good,
and we were in first place, at that time, '66, all that mattered,
pitcher and catcher bound, not just by effort or desire,
but linked in an orbit of speed and motion, a joy that moved, untroubled by the world,
naïve, immediate—

and one night I invited Bobby over to my house, my neat little segregated neighborhood,
with Jews and Catholics and depressed atheists you could identify
by the hazard of their uncut lawns, as though the landscape
were a kind of metaphysic--

and I recall the blend of excitement and unease I felt, a tension that went almost unnoted,
when he and his mother, who was somewhat large and old and nearly gray,
pulled up in what must have been a car from the 40's, the lines of its hood
and fenders and roof all beautifully rounded--

and though I can't imagine now what it must have been like for him, just eleven
and black,
with all those white people standing at the door and smiling, my mother, my sister, me,
one thread-worn azalea on each side of the stoop, the front grass deep
in oak-tuft and maple, still bright from recent falling—

I think we were happy, glad to be there, shy, open, as boys are, or can be, uncluttered,
and we spent the night flipping baseball cards, matching and mismatching sides,
as called, the faces poised at the edge of action,

pitchers in mid-windup, batters peering out at us as though we hurried, dangerously,
 spinning toward them,
the next day passing unmindful and content and curious, the world united
 in its flush and blossom—

until a few weeks later someone complained to the league office, that Bobby, it seemed,
 was born three days too late or early, and according to their calculations,
red Mars casting its martial shadow across the path of Venus, he was too old
 to play in the minors,

so they moved him, forcibly, mid-season, by rule and fiat, to another team,
 which is when I learned what laws were made to do to those who hadn't made them,
and the world became, in a day, more dense and weighted, as though summer
 had thickened into a shadow
no one could pass through.

After that, after the tears and objections, the vague tribunal of league officials,
we would go, almost the whole team at first, the Sadowskis and Kramers and Engelhardts
 and Jones,
to watch Bobby play, first baseman now, as the coach's son was a pitcher,

but eventually everything just went away,
disappeared, it seemed, into the oncoming heat of summer, the season's end,
 the way things can, and do, sometimes for good,
though who can hardly tell for sure,
and for me it all became a kind of vague regret and choler in the climax
 of August,
a scar on a part of the body you cannot see
 unless you try to,

until years later, in High School, when we met again--
blacks, whites, Bobby, me, recognizable, glad,
 parked in our cars by the Great South Bay,
playing Clapton and Hendrix and Herbie Hancock on our eight-tracks,

smoking dope and drinking, and listening to Ralph Rivera tell us all
about this book by a guy named Castaneda,
who we had not read,
and how he'd learned the arts, Ralph said, passing the joint to the person beside him,
of another world,
where a man might forget his body and rise, unfettered, into freedom and power,
accompanied, depending
on the character of his soul, the depth of his wisdom,
by the dark, shimmering, light-filled, knowing
body of the crow.

The After

Soft as fine silt
in the river's eddy
when the water has withdrawn itself. A skin
that glistens.

And the silence we move towards
that rests
within our bodies,
a season of hardwoods and temperance—
your cotton nightgown burred
with filaments of light,
pale as mountain aster.

We are given to this--
its astral sighting, its ancient
conjunction, the white rim
of the ridgeline
that borders the valley of our refuge.

It's impossible to describe,
this presence we have discovered,
emerged from our meeting and surrender.

Only later will we think this—
never forget--
and to remind ourselves
of bird-flight and rain and blooming wisteria,
of the morning's small and unrushed invitations,
of the sun's immediate,
and how it has held us, slant and transfixed,
within its arrivals.

We do not speak of it.

It is too full to speak of.

We are like horses who lift their heads from grazing
when a child approaches
from the edge of a river.

Just look--
lithe red willows looped at the bank,
cottonwoods in spore,
curious and light and passing.

The Forest

I don't know how far it goes
but it begins somewhere. It ends
somewhere too.

I have heard there are deserts to its south,
grasslands to the east, fields
that extend into a seeming and comfort
the earth,

that these are its margins.

This, at least, is what people say.
It is like a song they sing:

to the south, to the east,
to the west a great ocean,
a very great ocean.

I, myself, however, know
only the forest.

I am an accomplice to its charges,
its course, like a broad river of quills
on the back of a prehistoric omnivore,
easing along the mountains and valleys.

It is a curious creature, supple as a snake.
It breathes and it rests, it sleeps,
it moves and migrates with the wind.
And each tree has its own temperament.
Each sepal and strand of grass.
Each brush-bloom. Each cone.
It is a wonder to witness this.

How this one sways like a feather,
how that one braces, incalitrant, against a storm,
how this other mimics an inscrutable stillness.

Of course, nothing here is ever still.

Each fragment of shadow,
each needle, each leaf,
each vesicle and root,
flows with sap-light,
bristles with air,
dull and sparkling
by turn and by season.

The forest is just a word I use
to describe a kind of motion,
a place that is not just inhabited by motion
but is a class of motion unto itself,
just as I am a motion within that unending--

making my way up a ridgeline to a granite outcrop,
crossing a field of lichen and alpine florets,
descending the avalanche wash,
crimping the steep of the valley
that borders a river.

Even those high stones are part of the forest,
bathing the forest in measuring shadow,
a dark revolution cooling the air,
braising the forest the way only a shadow can
when the sun is high.

I am not alone here. You should know that.

No one here is alone.

In the forest, alone is just the word we use
to describe our distances from things,

or the time it takes to cross
from one part of the forest to another,
from aspen to aspen, fir to fir,
steep slope to shallow.

Alone is just the word we use
to create an illusion of ourselves
as we move through the forest,
its heights above us,
its body, yes, body of air,
its light and shadow,
pinheads of snow clustered in the tips
of a pinyon's branches,
a colony of crystals.

I have heard that some people fear the forest.
They look at it from afar
as though it were the haze in a fairy tale,
the spume of an alien planet.
They shudder at the dangers they are certain it contains.
Danger is the word they use to describe their isolation.
But in the forest it is the word we use
to describe the parts of ourselves
that surprise us—
the timber rattler, the badger, the pine beetle and the bear.

In the forest, danger is an introduction.
It is a courtesy.

Strange, isn't it, how the forest knows this.
Here you are, it seems to say,
And then it breaks us.
Some say the breaking sets us free,

but I do not know
if this is true.
I am not broken yet,
though I have been rendered.

There is no way to explain it.
People say it is a mystery,
But mystery is just a word we use
to describe a language we have never learned.

Just watch the wind brush the snow
from the top of a ponderosa.
Watch the entire forest stream with strings of light.
Watch the elk turn their faces toward your horizon of movement.
Then pretend you are the stillness they turn toward.
Try that.
See how loud your breath becomes.

Undinal

I moved then, at the edge of it, unbroken, undenied, matching the pulse of the waves and their breaking, daring the water to come and find me, racing from what I called its turbulence, towards what I mistook for its retreat, its swollen face like a mouth opening, its release, uneven and dangerous, shooting forward with a suddenness that hurt and startled, a strained hesitation in the wave before the leaping. And then it found me—what wanted me—this birth that is in water—took me by the hips and tossed me backwards, like a pair of hands that came out of darkness or sleep to steal me from myself and what I knew and wanted, terrifying in its swiftness and force, its intention, absolute and firm and upon me—drawing me into itself—into salt and heave and wave and the mindless hunger that was my source or beginning and wanted me back, always, or so it seemed, leaving me wet and frightened and on the beach, my mother laughing. This was the sea. The place of birth. The beginning of memory, the origin of my name and how it carried me, and where. This was the first thing. Its ending. What becomes and is becoming—the husk inside the husk that needs be broken.

The roundness fallen from the tree. The macadamia.