

Brevity

John Kerl

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1 Brevity

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Part I
Night

2 Porchlight

It was a fine, chill night rain
of dark drops that fell almost unnoticed
until they landed with tiptoes
to shiver silver and soft in the porchlight,
tiny beads like a mote's tears
that reflected, each one, the broad night
 and the small, warm point of yellow light
on their delicate round mirror faces

— 1990

3 Shades of Grey

Okay, all right --
so I'd rather

amble slowly under the murky sky
and stark black-green
branched and leafy silhouettes

and spend my attention on
how the big, just-risen
almost-full moon's
not-quite-white
grey
not-quite-round
oblong
muted brilliance
turns the murk a dark
misty shade of grey
 ever
 so
 silently
showing me peace
and how to just do my job
without fussing about myself

than stay inside, in the
decorum and clamour
of business being conducted
and souls blind to the moon
rushing around

— 1989

4 Not Much

I was feeling like not much at all,
 except maybe a lifeless rock lying hot in the desert sun,
 or maybe the thin gray watery oatmeal
 that goes neglected at the edge of the pot
-- I was feeling like not much at all,
except not good,
because the few stars showed wan and flat on the pallid sky
through the smog and lit night of the city,
because Orion's scabbard and the Pleiades
did not shine like glittering double handfuls of jewels
on fire in all the blackness,
but rather were much like
only two or three drops of watery milk
on a tacky and worn, pale plastic blue tablecloth

— 1989

Part II
School

5 Spring

What could possibly be worth the
uptight insistence on dry pages of a book
when spring comes blowing,
all overhead and through me, fresh and cool,
skipping out of winter,
with still a tatter of chill
on its thin young shoulders,
giggling confident, delighted promises,
tumbling every tree and care and brilliant jumble of cloud
everywhere,
certainly giving no special attention
to those pages riffling amok in the breeze?

— *Spring 1990*

6 Storm

It is sunset on planet Earth,
the one spot in the universe
where I feel at home

Its oranges and blues and melancholies,
beyond all counting,
stir me more subtly and deeply
than any lifeless stone,
thin red sands
or hot iron plains

The drum-beating and ritual cries,
mad drunken rantings and sober contemplations
of our small tribe
scattered on its brown soils --
these are all dear to me
and will surely become the sweeter
as wisdom ripens in me
and age pulls me closer
to the inevitable parting

Does one live or die in overwork?
As a young man
I am bound with thin tendrils of acquaintance
to my kind,
and hope that they will take root
and flower

Have you seen a storm in the desert?
It is apocalyptic,
a grey, massive benediction,
water, the most precious thing,
an obvious miracle,
unasked for
and vital

7 Math

Do not stop, old man --
I wish only to sit and hear you speak
 I am but a mere acolyte,
 a towel-boy
 of the tongue of the centuries,
 the tools that pry open the dusty, fermented casks of reality
 and flick aside the trivial, daily task of carrying water
I do not even like you --
you are not me,
and I am less than I will be --
but I want what you have

I have seen Scorpio
high in the southern night,
a finely and delicately worked structure
stretching up to dizzying heights
more vast than all the tiny earth below
and a little man there lacking breath --
heights upon which a giant
might laugh

My hands wander lost and amok through the texts
in the old and new tongue,
barely tasting secrets that gorge my mind,
marvelous things
that I will not comprehend
unless my understanding multiplies
steadily upon itself

— *Spring 1991*

Part III
Wanting

8 Breathless

The first time I saw you
I ran into you, slightly audaciously forward
Your dark brilliant eyes
flashed at me in mild reproof
and I fancied that your slightly smiling glance
tarried on me for a moment
with almost as much fascination
as that which held me breathless
until far after your long hair had tossed in turning away

— *Spring 1990*

9 Simplicity

I spot her distant smile
and choose simplicity,
her face among many as many times before,
white skin, black hair, black eyes,
her name a blank on my tongue

A voice says

Her veins run liquid fire
Her back is an S chiseled in alabaster
There is a mole on her left shoulder blade
 like a blot of lust
 written on a tablet of purity
Her eyes are cool opals set in the midst of a sea of desire
Go talk to her

He's not helping

Simplicity knots and wrenches away from me
I build her into an unbearable vision
If I tilt this windmill
it will shiver into insubstantial powder on the breeze
We share closed-mouthed, enigmatic smiles and glances away
yet
were I to whisper destruction into months of silence
I would see the real woman awaiting me

— *Fall 1990*

10 Foreign

I would write
a poem in a language you do not speak.
And I would read it to you,
and, finishing, smile
and say, -- There.
-- You have heard
my heartsong,
purer than any I could compose
in our English.
It is the lament
of the foreigner,
walking, awkward, afraid, uncertain,
and small,
drowning in
what he cannot comprehend.
This
would be my poem to you;
in not understanding
you would finally understand.

— 1990

11 Muted

The sky glows faintly
past moonless midnight --
mysterious sourceless muted light --
not quite surpassing
the glinting stars behind.
I ponder this
as I lie sleepless, preoccupied,
gazing out my window.

You are an enigma,
wordless woman.
You are a rock,
solid
and silent.

None may move you
-- folly be the efforts
of he who tries.

Crickets and cicadas outside my window
sing loud their little business
but stone, more substantial,
offers the ear less of an explanation
of its greater strength
and weightier worries.

I blow through this night rootless
-- as all nights, and days --
a nomad puff of dandelion-seed
seeking soil.
-- All soil is
stone split
and
crumbled into loamy richness
by
eons of roots' grasp --
and yet you admit no fingerhold

on your smooth surface.

It is no wonder
that I roam.

A
different child, a
shadow on the playground,
now in manhood
still seeks
to flesh out self.
And fumbles at conversation.

You, too, are timid
-- so, you drift back, silent and passive
into my sleepless thoughts --
this I can know.
But your muted eyes, faintly glowing that
absent smile --
this, I do not know.
Do they reflect my want of you,
or glitter celestial indifference?

— 1990

Part IV

Losing

12 Proposition

"Proposition: assertion is true
if the assertion's predicate holds
its associated experiences"
scribbled my professor
in dry white chalk
on a dusty whitish-greenish chalkboard,
a pat statement scribbled among many.

But he failed to consider a few extenuations.
I would postulate this

Proposition: assertion is true
when a cat's paw of breeze
unsettles a heavy-handed wing
of one of the fluttery butterflies
that grip my stomach
whom I have so far succeeded in calming
as I part my lips to speak to you

My assertion remains true
even as I feel it begin to go all wrong,
silly geese flying not south but east by northeast,
senseless honking trailing off into silence

My assertion is
still true
though you discard
the unlikely-looking grey oyster who
guards tight-lipped
his lustrous pearls
in favor of a finnier, bolder,
toothier man

— *Spring 1990*

13 Haze

I wonder and guess where you are
How you've been
What sort of thoughts are driving your mind
No one's seen you for a week
And you're not home when I call

When I last saw you
the bright eyes and leaping mind I had known were
heavy with
not enough sleep
and an alienating burden
that I couldn't touch or know
or even scarcely see
across the hazy distance between us

That's my clue I suppose

I miss you
in lonely unease
like this chilly October night's long walk home
without a coat to hold in my warmth
or protect my frailty
And I will still wonder
with unclosed eyes
deep into the countless sleepless ticks of my clock
in the quiet darkness

But my boss
smiled at me (!)
tonight
and we joked over a beer
And leaving homeward
I see that the stiff October wind
has blown the city night
clear of smog and dust --

brilliant bluish moon
 casting stark tree shadows on the pale sidewalk
and brittle points of stars
pouring pure and sharp from the
blackest sky
to hone keen my blurry consciousness

My body
in still and wordless wonder
for a while is light
and for a moment life is a good thing

— 1990

14 Stop Sign

The ways of a man's mind may seem nonsensical to a woman,
so you may not understand, but ...

A woman is
a center
and a woman is whole
and she holds life
But a man is more of a
reaching out
and he always needs
and rummaging through the meager leaves and travel bag
that are himself
he never finds the roots or the trunk
or the warm home and respite for feet weary from the
distant paths his mind wanders

This is why man is always
searching
and sometimes conquering
and seeking to possess
while woman looks askance at him
through knowing eyes
and laughs to herself at his folly

This is why women are fast friends
and can bear to carry another's tears on their shoulders
and in their tangled and wettened hair
and share the bitter open wounds of the deepest gnawing aches
But
while men
shoot the bull for a while
and -- unable to hug -- give each other that awkward
chuck on the shoulder in parting
and then turn hesitantly away uneasy and unsatisfied
with a weak laugh and something mumbled

they know that a man's company
is just not enough

This is why
-- although I was a
passing interest
to you --
this is why -- even though we'd barely met --
my oldest hopes
 that my transient heart might find a warm place to live
crumbled
and the pieces
sank heavily to the pit of my stomach
to boil forth in bitter gall of anger and frustration
and then subsided into the cold burdensome
 renewed reality of life-long empty sorrow
when you told me
about
him

— 1990

Part V
Finding

15 Gravity

My legs weigh five hundred pounds apiece
and my body at least a ton --
and to heave my feet forward
wearies my lifeless and sluggish mind

It always surprises me how your smile
can lift me
so that my thoughts yearn upward
and my toes reach down to
dance lightly on the ground

— 1991

16 Eye to Eye

She has stilled my preoccupied hands
and calmed my darting gaze

She has bereft me of my facetiousness
to leave me bathing unprotected
in the glow of her affection

She has pacified my wandering wit
and wiped the accustomed smirk from my face
leaving nothing in my eyes
but a blunt and direct artlessness
in which she somehow finds me at my most appealing

She has shown me a new man,
small, wide-eyed, and uncertain,
whom I have not yet come to know

— 1991

17 Wakefulness

Other nights
I have dismissed the darkness,
forgetting in sleep
the all-but-empty sky

Call me an eager acolyte
of the rational tradition --
I thought magic a wispy phantom,
conjured in insufficient dreams

I should have known --
I saw shooting stars the last three nights,
burning brilliantly out of nowhere
against an idle background,

just when I had finally concluded
that I knew every constellation,
when I had weighed the sky
and found it wanting

Between my lips,
your kiss lingering there,
I still feel the magic that
shakes the very stars from the heavens

I am too wise
to hope too much
yet I am happy to find that
I am smiling, out of nowhere

— 1991

18 Seen

thing about turning fifty
she said
eyes full on me and ablaze
a smile pulling at the corner of her mouth
the sense of life not over, but well through --
time to pay attention

— 2019

19 Continents

Her words and my thoughts
are walking in parallel

It turns out I have	she says
a complex	and
inner life	her eyes are oceans of grey
which not everyone gets	with continents of brown
... if	there is a world in there
that	and I am starting to smile
makes	as I start to try
any	to count
sense?	all the ways to say yes

— 2019

20 Library of Congress

Its exterior is charming
and rich with history
and yes you would turn your head to look twice
on your way past

but

unless you stepped inside
you would never know
its every floor wall and ceiling
rococo and resplendent with patient attention to detail
your neck craning up
and up
as the words "just ... wow" pass your lips

She is telling me about her city
and finding her place in college
and the never-quite-fitting of high school
and the irreplaceable freedom of being eleven
and the tangled forked reconnecting trodden paths
that lead
to this particular square of tile

Our fingertips touch
and our eyes meet
with a sparkle of recognition
as we begin to open
one book
from one shelf

— 2019

Part VI

Flying

21 Cocoon

I had all but given up

Time and time again

 she derided; I objected; she denied; I retreated
The pattern played itself out,
the numbing fibers I was extruding
entangling first my feet
until I had held myself firmly down

Expecting less and less,

the soul dies a shred at a time -- not all at once;
nor is it immediately revived

Leaves had long since fallen

Snow had drifted long in the wind

Branches had forgotten greenery

... now new buds stretch to find the moist air

I emerge at long last from my cocoon,

diaphanous wings sparkling in the spring sunlight

 -- how fragile and vulnerable, I now know

I will take care of them

I am flying

— *Spring 2006*

22 Nomad

Brushing my teeth over yet another sink
Stiff in the neck from sleeping on the couch
Drinking gas-station coffee while cactuses tick by
 at seventy miles per hour
Seeing my girls smile to see me again

Nomad indeed
I have found my home:
it is wherever
I
am

— *Spring 2006*

23 Inheritance

I had thought a parent would teach,
hard-won wisdom flowing from older to younger
like so much water running downhill --
I would smile
 with a knowing wink
as you received these inheritances

Absurd

Your blue eyes flash in the sunlight as you look behind,
your laughter floating back to me on the wind,
your strong seven-year-old legs skating past me with ease

I am still learning from you, young one

— *Spring 2006*

24 Tangle

Thoughts tangle as ever
Behind each deadline stands another,
in a compressed infinite recursion

A day off; lunch eaten; an errand run
The light is red

and

as if heretofore unseen, as if brand new:

 Rumpled cloudtops dazzle in the slant of spring afternoon sunlight

 A white bird tosses distantly on the stiff wind,

 like a piece of scrap paper,

 yet rising under its own control

 It is 2:37 and a half

The world is poised on its pivot
waiting to go

— *Spring 2006*

25 Issues

I didn't ask for all this snow on my sidewalk
left here in the unconscious night
with such downward, paternal abandon

No one else is the homeowner
so I had better get shoveling
Otherwise an innocent passer-by
-- or worse yet, someone dear to me --
could get hurt

— *Summer 2006*

Part VII
Chance

26 Complexity

We share the cooking, her couch, and our bungled pasts
and uncertainty (yet again) knots within me:

It's too soon
It's too late
It will end badly
It will begin badly
Someone, somewhere, will laugh at my audacity
She is wrong for me
She will stop me with a wince and a pat on the arm,
telling me I'm sweet but ...

A day and a mile later
the die waits in my hand, ready to cast,
the river running before me

A voice says
It is our laughter that swirls between us,
shaping possibilities into existence
The universe scintillates not with risk
but with boundless opportunity

I watch her smile
and I choose complexity,
my hands now on her skin and her eyes in mine

A week and four thousand miles later
there is only an empty tupperware,
one of hers sitting mismatched on my shelf
Perhaps the two of them are laughing now
It is complex indeed, and audacious,
but not having dared
would have been foolish

— *Summer 2006*

27 Odysseus

She is well-traveled
with Troy leagues behind her
Having lashed herself to the mast,
she would sail by --
but for my siren song
She has withstood much
but now
with clear-eyed purpose
her fingers stretch
to loosen her own bonds

— *Fall 2006*

28 Gyre

The touch of her hand,
the sparkle of her smiling eyes,
a wildflower given without condition --
these make me want to respond in kind,
and more
Thus impelled, we spiral upward
toward heights as yet unseen

— *Fall 2006*

29 With Apologies to Frank Drake

I disproved your existence
most of a lifetime ago --
another soul as eccentric as mine
occurs as an absurdly long product
of vanishingly small improbabilities

Nose to nose
grinning
and transparent
we defy all reason

— *Fall 2006*

30 Touch

Younger, I had been a ghost
moving through the world but not seen by it
Our simple touch
completes my resubstantiation

— *Fall 2006*

31 Cut-outs

It cannot work
Driving over,
my thoughts cross back and forth, tracing
two cardboard cut-out incompatible personalities --
all over but the hard words --
my decision is simple

She leans out the window on my arrival
looking for me,
with a stray wisp of hair on her cheek
and a half-smile on her face
She knows, and does not know

It is not so easily ended

— *Summer 2007*

32 Algernon

I ran into her again last night
Months of greetings strobed suddenly through my memory
like a two-body recap of Flowers for Algernon --
someone I once barely knew,
someone for whom my passion burned,
yet again someone I know

Hi, how are you?

I like you

I love you

I like you

Hi, how are you?

— *Summer 2007*

33 Seasons

Autumn is the traditional metaphor for dying --
winter is death; spring, rebirth
Not so in the desert --
it is at most a change of hue;
no dirges need play

People bring out their sweaters
as the wind blows a little sharper
Alone tonight, I was particularly aware of this

I miss you sometimes
 and yet
a woman smiled and greeted me this evening --
I looked her in the eyes and introduced myself
In that moment
all was already well

— *Fall 2007*

Part VIII

On foot

34 Storm Part Two

Grey ranks of stormcloud loom on the horizon
My feet fall into a now-familiar rhythm
My breath ebbs and flows, patient as the tide
My heart beats fast but quietly --
 doing as it always could
 had I only known

With three and a half miles behind me
and three and a half to go,
I laugh as I realize
I am not tired yet

Thunder crackles
and fine drops start to soften the soil underfoot
The rain is nourishing and cool
I am healed,
growing,
and running forward

— *Summer 2006*

35 Under Stars at Night

Running under the stars at night,
I am accompanied by the rhythm of my footfalls
and the wordless, patient whisper of my breath

Sprinklers hiss moistly, invisibly,
preparing the ground for the onset of desert morning

A teenage couple lingers in the cone of a street light,
embracing at the curb, the car door standing open
Their date is over but their evening is not --
not just yet

A face gritty with razor stubble flares into existence,
glowing dull red from a cigarette lighter,
then disappears a second later into the blank darkness,
leaving only a bobbing red dot
which soon also fades from sight

The Orionid meteor shower has returned:
fifteen times the earth has swung imperturbably around
to trouble this patch of sky,
fifteen years since I last wrote of it
And what? I am still wakeful,
and another kiss lingers between my lips

I am much stronger now,
somewhat wiser,
and a little grey --
once again starting over,
and still taken by surprise
by the reliable inconstancy of the heavens

Now I turn to run directly into it,
finally doubting no more,
permitting the radiance

to pierce me straight through

— *Fall 2006, 12:26 a.m.*

36 On Foot

I open my eyes and raise my head
A thousand souls stand gathered for the start
 -- chilly fellow runners,
 or a line of my ancestors
 quietly watching me take my turn
The road twists down and out of sight
The sun rises over the mountains

Footfalls land lightly under me
Atmosphere eddies in my lungs
Blood runs richly through my veins
Landscapes move gently by

Death was yesterday; today is life

I am glad I came here

— *December 2, 2007* (Also in *Turns.*)

37 Relay

Accepting the baton from my teammate,
running forward
on foot under the stars,
 under a million distant suns,
my headlamp penciling dustily off into the black void --

my efforts,
my ancestors' hopes,
my descendants' pride,
all concentrate together here
in this present, this one
shining, pulsing
moment

— *February 29, 2008*

38 Morning Jog

Silhouetted stark against grey sky,
rich dark brown in the wet fog,
bony hands of sapling branches
grasping empty --

each gnarled knuckle glittering
with a pendulous raindrop,
jewels dangling clear on every thin joint --

waiting for spring,
yet patiently,
and not without reward

— *January 2012*

Part IX

Turns

39 Photos

Going through my mom's old photos
I saw not my sister, but my mother's daughter;
not myself, but my mother's son

In the mirror I see
just another guy
Through her eyes --
all the world's treasure

— *December 2007*

40 Ends

As hard as it was to let go of her,
it could only have been harder
for her to let go of herself --
seeing the strands slip from her fingers,
watching the disobedient unraveling of the soul
which she had spent a lifetime
so carefully weaving

— *December 2007*

41 Turns

I open my eyes and raise my head
A thousand souls stand gathered for the start
 -- chilly fellow runners,
 or a line of my ancestors
 quietly watching me take my turn
The road twists down and out of sight
The sun rises over the mountains

Footfalls land lightly under me
Atmosphere eddies in my lungs
Blood runs richly through my veins
Landscapes move gently by

Death was yesterday; today is life

I am glad I came here

— *December 2, 2007* (Also in *On Foot.*)

42 Athrum

You can touch time
but not hold it --
like a biologist treading water at sea
while a mighty blue whale
passes under her fingertips

Feel its motion, its texture --
from the first touch of its snout
through its stunning midsection
until the last thrust of its fluke
sends you spinning in its wake

— *December 2007*

43 Meteor Shower Part Three

It is 3 a.m.

I am suddenly and inexplicably blinking and awake
This year my daughter sleeps next to me,
with her sleeping bag close and warm around her ears

Earlier, lying there looking up,
we traced out constellations
She told me messages she read in the stars
I saw only wordless points and figures of light
She told me, Daddy, you have to believe in magic

The earth, with us riding along,
has made its annual plunging return through the Orionids
Shocked and scorched by the sudden atmosphere,
a few of them end a billion years of silent flight
in a radiant burst --
afire for seconds at most,
but oh, the beauty

— *October 2007*

44 Meteor Shower Part Four

Still awake in the dark
one vacation weekend,
we're sitting on the hood of the car,
in the warm breeze
looking up

She's jaded now,
no longer eight but almost fourteen
The starry vault of the heavens
has pivoted around in its slow entirety a half-dozen times,
through winter constellations and summer
Math is boring
One boy is jealous of the way she talks to another boy
Hoops dangle from her ears
Self-aware, she knows what her hair looks like at every moment
And she knows good coffee from bad

She points and says,
"Hey Dad, did you see that shooting star?
Do you remember watching for them when I was little?"

... Does not a forest
... remember the very rain that nourished it?

— *July 2013, 11:02 p.m.*

45 Meteor Shower Part Five

Through the tent flap
framed by sharp black pine silhouettes
to left and right,
moonless sky glows less dark;
Sirius and Procyon
shine faithful and radiant
near old Orion

Almost sixteen now
High school half over
She tells me things now that scare
me but not her

She pitched the tent
and made half of dinner

Six months old
in bright red footie jammies
she grinned and giggled
as I held her aloft

A meteor shoots left

At fifteen months she first wobbled to her feet
grinning again

And another

Before any of that,
Her mother and I talked alone outside one night
about this time of the evening
about the idea of her:
What if we ...

She sleeps

I sleep

Before dawn
in the same black-pine silhouetted frame
through the same tent flap
now strides Scorpio, high and elaborate

another side of the sky
entirely

— *March 2015, 3:48 a.m.*

46 Meteor Shower Part Six

My lover and I alone on a pier at night
Perseids this time of year
Skies clear; quiet chatting;
familiar late-summer constellations all in their places
An I-think-I-saw-it or two from the corner of my eye
-- and then --
a bolting bolide trailing bright green fire
 fully halfway across the dark star-salted sky,
leaving no doubt,
not even requiring poetic license

Same week
my daughter
 she of the footie jammies,
 she of the 3 a.m. tent-flap,
called -- happily, overflowingly happily -- with the expectant news
and it all begins again,
another cosmic cycle

A grandson as third copy of the self?
Certainly not; we are all of us different,
paths crossing just a bit in space,
lifespans overlapping just a bit in time,
personalities intersecting at the occasional inside joke
and the way-back-when memories
and some shared hopes
for more irreplaceable brief sudden-bright moments
such as this

— *August 2022, 11:53 p.m.*

47 River Gods

A building on the hilly horizon
was a distant castle,
the river twisted downhill through misty forests
toward unforeseen adventures,
dragons spoke their cleverness with a wink,
and that contrail in the sky
was a starship entering the atmosphere of my planet,
emissaries of an interstellar empire --
hostile or amicable, I would soon find out
... when I was a boy

Now I know
that's an apartment building,
that contrail is traced by a northbound airliner,
full of tourists and businesspeople yawning over half-empty coffee cups,
magazines sitting open in their laps,
on their way to another city
much the same as their own,
and the riverbed,
running with snowmelt off the mountains to the northeast,
silts and gravels its way on a downhill gradient toward the sea
in a very fascinating and scientific way

Looking down from the airplane flying over us
back to my daughter --
I see her splashing barefoot on the riverbank
with the dog
but she's lost in thought --
she's a Naiad; her river wends its way toward Poseidon and Amphitrite

Thank the gods
for youth

— *Spring 2010*

Part X

Confidence

48 Patience

She sees my soul
as clearly as her own --
this alone sets her apart,
her sparkle and her laughter notwithstanding

When our lips finally met
-- gentle, soft, questioning --
it could not have been otherwise

— *December 2007*

49 Handmade

People ask me how it goes
and I tell them:
every facet
of my life
sparkles

She has a mirror,
a chain of butterflies linked along the top
Though she could not have known my metaphor
they could not have been better placed
Standing, I looked within and saw
the man who looks back at me
in darting and swooping,
full and glorious flight

— *January 2008*

50 Morning

Fingers slipping the other earring in place,
she turned and gasped
in sudden joy --
to see her dog and me,
curled up together,
both at ease
and both nearly asleep,
morning sunshine
slanting warm through the window

— *January 2008*

51 Morning Part Two

Though the days have fallen past,
beyond count in their thousands,
though I am never quite the same man,
some things remain:
I never tire
of sleeping in,
nor of a steaming cup of black coffee,
nor of a long hot blissful shower

Fear neither time nor the cold, beloved --
your smile and your touch
remain as warm and welcome
as the sunrise

— *January 2008*

52 New

Having finally gathered myself
back unto myself

(I said),
sculpted now in my own image,
proud of my handiwork,
I will not
will not will not will not
let it all evaporate again

Nor

(she said)
would I want you to

What had seemed a doorway into a box
was all along
a doorway out

— *February 2008*

53 Belongings

He had to be coaxed out of the car --
it was too much to hope for,
too much to believe

Can I ...
you mean ...
really???

She told him, smiling:

We are here for you, boy

Tail wagging,
four limbs a blur,
neck muscles porpoising down and back up,
he bounded joyfully off through the snow

— *February 2008*

54 Evening

The dog trots beside me, ears high,
her eagerness
having drawn me out

Evening falls and colors deepen vividly
Heavy blue-grey clouds roil overhead,
laden with possibilities
Smells of life, large and small,
grass, dust, pollen,
swirl through my breath --
the very air moist and rich --
as pleasant thoughts of you
swirl through my mind
The body exults
as we walk

A gentle rain releases
a crowning benediction
and lesser things fade

Work
can wait

— *Summer 2008*

55 All Aboard

Steam hisses and billows cinematically along the platform
The conductor looks down, thumbs his pocketwatch, and nods
A whistle sounds
The background music swells mightily
Lovers kiss quickly,
parting too soon, and almost too late --
a war needs to be won,
half a world away

But it is just you and me
running for a bus
down a February Manhattan sidewalk --
no one is crying on anyone's shoulder while the movie plays;
no one is reaching for more popcorn

Work needs doing,
three states away
You will be back in the spring
Things will be blooming again
and we will pick up again,
starting afresh from where we left off last time

Two dozen hurried steps
and two dozen heartbeats later,
we made it
The doors re-open for us
Now it is a kiss good-bye,
now it is you
and me
and only you climb up
and away

— *February 2011*

Part XI
New York

56 Centuries

This city is far older than I,
far larger than I --
post offices as big as warehouses;
apartments in rows of storied brick,
full of tangled lives and stories;
people young, old,
brown, yellow, black, and white,
speaking a hundred languages,
all shoulder to shoulder on the subway;
trains coursing the same routes since before I was born,
trains pulsing five million souls in and out daily,
cells driven by a great, beating heart

Neighborhoods have names,
streets have histories,
this city bustled in its millions
even before the automobile or the airplane --
generations of buildings have fallen and re-risen
in a layered palimpsest of ambition

And now here I am, feet on sidewalk,
the Chrysler Tower scalloped and elegant behind my left shoulder,
the Brooklyn Bridge ahead, waiting massive, ancient and benevolent

The biggest ego cannot compete;
one can only hope to participate

Someone's great-great-grandfather came here, seeking a better life;
someone's great-grandfather moved up and out;
his great-grandson comes back, taking his own chances

— *Spring 2010*

57 Wagons East

My great-great-grandfather, great-grandfather, and grandfather
worked their way steadily west --
the Battery (before Ellis Island), New Jersey,
Missouri, Kansas, and Colorado;
and my father moved us from Denver to Phoenix
before I was a man

Had I taken a job in, say, the Bay,
we've have done it --
coast to coast in a mere five generations,
a quick one hundred thirty years

But no

Here we go, family, dog, U-Haul trailer and I,
ka-ding!-ing like a carriage return on an old-fashioned typewriter
all the way back to that same island,
starting another line in that same story

— *Spring 2010*

58 Morning Jog

Silhouetted stark against grey sky,
rich dark brown in the wet fog,
bony hands of sapling branches
grasping empty --

each gnarled knuckle glittering
with a pendulous raindrop,
jewels dangling clear on every thin joint --

waiting for spring,
yet patiently,
and not without reward

— *January 2012*

Part XII
Favorites

59 Wakefulness

Other nights
I have dismissed the darkness,
forgetting in sleep
the all-but-empty sky

Call me an eager acolyte
of the rational tradition --
I thought magic a wispy phantom,
conjured in insufficient dreams

I should have known --
I saw shooting stars the last three nights,
burning brilliantly out of nowhere
against an idle background,

just when I had finally concluded
that I knew every constellation,
when I had weighed the sky
and found it wanting

Between my lips,
your kiss lingering there,
I still feel the magic that
shakes the very stars from the heavens

I am too wise
to hope too much
yet I am happy to find that
I am smiling, out of nowhere

— 1991

60 Under Stars at Night

Running under the stars at night,
I am accompanied by the rhythm of my footfalls
and the wordless, patient whisper of my breath

Sprinklers hiss moistly, invisibly,
preparing the ground for the onset of desert morning

A teenage couple lingers in the cone of a street light,
embracing at the curb, the car door standing open
Their date is over but their evening is not --
not just yet

A face gritty with razor stubble flares into existence,
glowing dull red from a cigarette lighter,
then disappears a second later into the blank darkness,
leaving only a bobbing red dot
which soon also fades from sight

The Orionid meteor shower has returned:
fifteen times the earth has swung imperturbably around
to trouble this patch of sky,
fifteen years since I last wrote of it
And what? I am still wakeful,
and another kiss lingers between my lips

I am much stronger now,
somewhat wiser,
and a little grey --
once again starting over,
and still taken by surprise
by the reliable inconstancy of the heavens

Now I turn to run directly into it,
finally doubting no more,
permitting the radiance

to pierce me straight through

— *Fall 2006, 12:26 a.m.*

61 Meteor Shower Part Three

It is 3 a.m.

I am suddenly and inexplicably blinking and awake
This year my daughter sleeps next to me,
with her sleeping bag close and warm around her ears

Earlier, lying there looking up,
we traced out constellations
She told me messages she read in the stars
I saw only wordless points and figures of light
She told me, Daddy, you have to believe in magic

The earth, with us riding along,
has made its annual plunging return through the Orionids
Shocked and scorched by the sudden atmosphere,
a few of them end a billion years of silent flight
in a radiant burst --
afire for seconds at most,
but oh, the beauty

— *October 2007*

62 Meteor Shower Part Four

Still awake in the dark
one vacation weekend,
we're sitting on the hood of the car,
in the warm breeze
looking up

She's jaded now,
no longer eight but almost fourteen
The starry vault of the heavens
has pivoted around in its slow entirety a half-dozen times,
through winter constellations and summer
Math is boring
One boy is jealous of the way she talks to another boy
Hoops dangle from her ears
Self-aware, she knows what her hair looks like at every moment
And she knows good coffee from bad

She points and says,
"Hey Dad, did you see that shooting star?
Do you remember watching for them when I was little?"

... Does not a forest
... remember the very rain that nourished it?

— *July 2013, 11:02 p.m.*

63 Meteor Shower Part Five

Through the tent flap
framed by sharp black pine silhouettes
to left and right,
moonless sky glows less dark;
Sirius and Procyon
shine faithful and radiant
near old Orion

Almost sixteen now
High school half over
She tells me things now that scare
me but not her

She pitched the tent
and made half of dinner

Six months old
in bright red footie jammies
she grinned and giggled
as I held her aloft

A meteor shoots left

At fifteen months she first wobbled to her feet
grinning again

And another

Before any of that,
Her mother and I talked alone outside one night
about this time of the evening
about the idea of her:
What if we ...

She sleeps

I sleep

Before dawn
in the same black-pine silhouetted frame
through the same tent flap
now strides Scorpio, high and elaborate

another side of the sky
entirely

— *March 2015, 3:48 a.m.*

64 Meteor Shower Part Six

My lover and I alone on a pier at night
Perseids this time of year
Skies clear; quiet chatting;
familiar late-summer constellations all in their places
An I-think-I-saw-it or two from the corner of my eye
-- and then --
a bolting bolide trailing bright green fire
 fully halfway across the dark star-salted sky,
leaving no doubt,
not even requiring poetic license

Same week
my daughter
 she of the footie jammies,
 she of the 3 a.m. tent-flap,
called -- happily, overflowingly happily -- with the expectant news
and it all begins again,
another cosmic cycle

A grandson as third copy of the self?
Certainly not; we are all of us different,
paths crossing just a bit in space,
lifespans overlapping just a bit in time,
personalities intersecting at the occasional inside joke
and the way-back-when memories
and some shared hopes
for more irreplaceable brief sudden-bright moments
such as this

— *August 2022, 11:53 p.m.*