

Principals and Interest
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Part One: Observations

On Poets

Some poets seek
to lift us with the bringing
to life of the translucence
of the hawk's tail
as she circles in front of the sun;
some poets dazzle
us with the sound of silent music
shimmering our inward ear;
some poets regale
visions phasmogoric
of an unseen truth.
I, however, am
of the didactic variety:
those who must deliver unto the world
the wisdom we believe is so
unique,
hard won,
and important.

See the rooster climb the coop.
See Chanticleer puff himself up.
Crow!
Cock-a-doodle doo!

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Every Day

The weekend fills me top-full with direst dread.
Maybe it is the finality it shoulders,
maybe it is the weight of all the other days
coming to bear on this scale,
but either way the pressure is too much:
Friday night fights, Saturday night fever,
Sunday morning coming down.
Two days and three nights are too little time
to resolve this dichotomy
of salaciousness and sanctimony,
life reduced to a hotel promotional brochure.
Even the calendar cannot face this constant bickering
forcing the two Ss to sit at opposite sides like children,
like ornamental bookends, until they learn to behave.
Monday is judgment day; repeated interviews evaluating
the passing and the coming based solely on the ending.
Besides, Monday carries its undeserved reputation as a drudge
when it is only a return to normalcy.
Wednesday is hump day with its oblique sexual innuendo
of the promise and pressure of the weekend it sends us sliding to meet.
Thursday is all planning and promises;
Friday all apprehension.
The only day allowed to be itself is Tuesday
(sometimes maligned as “only” Tuesday)
sitting alone in its Zen contemplation of itself
in its existential courage.
Just once it would be nice to live a month of Tuesdays
and ignore everything else.

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Prank Calls

For the last few months
I've gotten prank phone calls
sometimes at three am
sometimes at other times.
Since then my wife has commented,
praised my burst of creativity
and suggested I might channel it
into a schlocky screenplay
or something equally more useful.
I don't blame her; I understand;
she is just thinking,
planning for our future.
I apologize because it is only what it is.
If something has to burst it may as well be creativity.

A call at three am is never good news
and what was once only a prank
is sure to turn serious eventually.
Although nothing to laugh about,
it is still a kind of joke.

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Another Face

If you look closely at some faces
they reveal another face beneath
the first: a face of bone and tooth
beneath the fleshy layer of self absorption.
For most people this face remains
our most private, more intimate than any thought,
never to be revealed by slip or desire
to be understood by another,
hidden even from ourselves.
These special faces to which I refer
are not those drawn, emaciated, hollowed faces
of the sick, or paradoxically of the hyper-healthy;
these special faces, fully lipped, fleshy cheeked, finely jowled,
somehow convey the contour of skull
they simultaneously obscure.
You will never see the real face beneath,
yet it is clearly seen all the same:
slope of brow, curve of mandible, dance and arc of orbit and socket.

Ancient cultures of hunters viewed the skeleton
as the essence of life
just as their agrarian brethren viewed the seed,
and so these special faces reveal
the essence of us all in a way
our more profane overt nature obscures us.

Forensic scientists can rebuild the flesh
with computer or clay,
but to obscure the cool of bone
after it has patiently waited for eternity
is something like a sin.
I like to hope that far in the future
some grand descendent digging the dirt
will uncover one of these special faces
to be our representative
from our present to their past
rather than one of the less remarkable faces
that only show you what they want to
not what they are.

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Blue Sky

I see a sky of blue, a deep rich blue
that holds its color from meridian to horizon
and perfect white clouds punctuating the color,
and I know the blue is really only
the scattering of the shortest wavelengths
of light, and blue is only the name
we give to these wavelengths
when detected by our electromagnetic energy detectors
we call our eyes, although knowing this cannot
diminish its beauty, and I am glad I was born me
and not a turnip.
A turnip's DNA cannot produce eyes, although
a turnip knows sunlight and temperature
and precipitation and as much about meteorology
as I do, and so these things are also a kind of seeing.
I do not think a turnip begrudges me for understanding optics
and thereby these fundamental things while it cannot understand anything
except those things a turnip needs to be a turnip.
For me to be me I must understand my version of those things
a turnip must understand, but I also see those things
a turnip cannot see, would not see, even if a turnip
had electromagnetic energy detectors like mine.
There is much that separates me from root vegetables,
but there is much that unites me to my fellow mammals
who have much the same electromagnetic energy detectors
as I do, and yet I feel confident that whenever a hamster, a horse,
a tiger, or even a chimpanzee detects those wavelengths of light
we call blue, none of them can understand the meaning of blue
that goes well beyond those things I share with a turnip;
however, mammals are not root vegetables either,
and so they share a rudimentary understanding
of the aesthetics I think makes me so superior.
Knowing this confirms Keats
and his dictum about beauty and truth,
and although a hamster, or even a chimpanzee,
cannot read Keats, I am still happy that I am
their cousins instead of a turnip
especially when I see a sky of blue.

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Cheesy Observations

I have found myself
pondering, wondering
to an astounding degree
about cheese.

This wonderfully complex concoction
has the humblest of origins.

It began as milk,
the essence of mammalian life,
let stand too long.

Imagine that brave and thrifty soul
who was the first
to eat of this spoiled rotten
and think,
not bad, I can do something with this.

And then, of course, he turned
into a salesman
and convinced the others to try,
to taste, to add their own
ideas until it became
something of its own
and not spoiled milk at all.

This achievement goes far
beyond lesser developments
because it transforms the refuse
into the sublime and beautiful.

It is akin to taking rat poison
and calling it medicine,
which of course my blood-thinning
medication is: rodenticide.

Imagine being the first
presented with that idea:
“We’d like to try giving you rat poison.
In theory, in the proper measure,
it should thin your blood
enough to keep you alive
but not enough to kill you.”
Of course I take it,

but I was not the first.
The first was like the second
to try cheese,
to become a cheese-eater,
like a rat in the woodpile.

[\(Back\)](#)

What Women Want

Everything:

a man,
a sensitive man,
a bad boy,
an intellect,
an idiot,
a comedian,
a philosopher,
a home,
a family,
money,
a career,
to be famous,
to be loved,
to be respected,
to be admired,
to be listened to,
a child,
a vacation,
a nice dinner,
a walk on the beach,
to hold hands,
to talk,
to cuddle,
to be on the bottom,
to be on the top,
a mojito,
a greyhound,
a sea breeze,
chocolate,
dark chocolate,
milk chocolate,
Swiss chocolate,
German chocolate,
Austrian chocolate,
a child,
sunshine,
nice furniture,

a dinette set,
an industrial stove,
a clean bathroom,
candles,
a maid,
support,
a phone,
a car,
trees,
flowers,
green grass,
a big salad,
soup,
chocolate,
good hair,
good skin,
good teeth,
good nails,
shoes,
clothes,
flannel sheets,
a child,
a warm fire,
cozy slippers,
chocolate,
a raise,
a promotion,
friends for dinner,
a night out,
a night on the town,
a quiet night at home,
a child,
chocolate,
and (after
as many things
are checked off
this list
as possible)
to be left alone.

[\(Back\)](#)

Doggie Style

In Portland the original expressed
purpose of the early fountains –
Skidmore, the one up on Park,
and the one of the elk
(although it doesn't look
much like an elk to me,
more like a giant hart,
but it's their statue,
so elk it is) –
was to refresh working
men, horses, and dogs
from their fatigues.
While this magnanimity
of the city fathers
is not unheard of
it is well appreciated.

Portlanders love their dogs;
the city is canine crazy.
Walking around downtown
you'd be amazed by their numbers
and their variety.
Big dogs, small dogs,
purebreds and mutts,
each and all the pride
of some leashed human.

Now me, I find it
sad when people use pets
in lieu of dysfunctional family,
especially when they dress them up
in miniature costume
of their own faded glory.
I am irritated by their presumption
when they drag them to Home Depot
simply because the store
has a concrete floor. No dog
that I know has ever

wielded a hammer or fixed a toilet.

But Portlanders take dogs
everywhere, and you'd be amazed
how polite they all are,
owners and owned alike
(if you don't find it impolite
to have animals sniff you
uninvited). The dogs
do not clash; no tense
teeth-bared stand-offs here.
And eco-friendly, these dogs,
not once will you step in shit.

Even the Portlanders who are dogless
seem obsessed: they will talk
to you about other people's dogs
passing by.
Some restaurants even offer
hitching posts of a sort
and water bowls near
their doors so their patrons
may leave their companions
without guilt.

All of this makes me wonder:
What happened to the horses?
So easily forgotten?

[\(Back\)](#)

Corporeal Nonchalance

I'm having an increasingly difficult time
with the concrete abstraction called time.
I cannot accept that there is this non-sentient absolute
that has the power to thwart our very highest
and lowest impulses as we creep
on this petty pace from day to day.

And yet, I notice my dog hasn't the slightest problem
accepting this notion with every fiber of his being.
My dog knows what time it is.
Without a watch it can speak with precision
when seven o'clock rolls around.

I'm having the same sort of trouble with the calendar:
the linear demarcation of macro units of time.
Aren't days and weeks and years an affliction,
an artificial construct designed to give us
the illusion of control?

And yet, my dog is not troubled by the day, week, or year,
but only by the hour at which dinner will arrive.

How can you live life while you simultaneously
watch it spiraling beyond your control to eternity?

[\(Back\)](#)

On the Sanctity of Marriage

As to the precise wording
of the vows we made
I do not remember,
other than the fact
that they were mostly bullshit anyway.
It is only important
to promise to love another:
honor and cherish are subsumed
by the concept of love.
(Does anyone actually promise
to obey anymore?
And if they do, how can they
do it with a straight face?)
And what are the conditions
under which this love is promised?
Typically they contain the specifics of
for better or worse,
for richer or poorer,
and in sickness and in health.
Again, this is mostly bullshit.
Anyone so naïve as to think
marriage is a series
of blue sky cloudless days is
simply too naïve to marry.
And is it really necessary
to swear to one another
that this isn't all about money?
No, the only valid condition is
the final one,
and its importance is
denoted by its syntax:
the others are presented
as positive followed by negative condition;
the last is presented as the obverse.
And again, is it really necessary
to promise to love one another
in health?

So the only true and important vow is
to love in sickness.
Anyone who has been ill
and felt the touch
of skin on naked scapula
or of a warm palm on a cool flank
knows the importance
of this vow.

But what are these sicknesses, really,
other than dress rehearsal
for the ultimate sickness
from which we will not recover?

Therefore, the real vow is:
I will love you through your dying
and the death that will part us.

I understand the actions of the English couple
(he was a conductor)
who solved this conundrum
by an eternal vacation to Switzerland.
There can be worse
than sliding into death together
after a lifetime
like a final midnight skinny dip
into black water.

This, too, upsets people,
mostly the same people
who want to tell us all
the real meaning of our marriages.
Who are these people,
who raise this stink,
who rage this hullabaloo
with all this rigmarole
about the meaning of other people's lives?
Aren't they the same people
who sing the loudest
about freedom

and keeping as much stuff as possible
and screw everybody else?

This pile of mud needs
to lie down and go to sleep.

[\(Back\)](#)

White Light

Seasons change
(as seasons are wont to do),
time marches on
(to its own drummer),
and years, months, days
cascade toward catastrophe
like calendar pages
flying off the screen
in some thirties gangster movie
with Cagney, Muni, or Edward G
sneering beneath the flapping
loosely aiming a tommygun
and then opening fire
with fierce carelessness.
“Top of the world, Ma!”

Top of the world, indeed.

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Part Two: Rants

Holdfast

And the dragon spoke to the man:

“Why have you come here
to this place where you are unwelcome?”

And the man replied:

“I have come in search of thee.
I have vowed to slay thee
for your gold and jewels and to free
the beautiful maiden chained
in the depths of your lair.”

And the dragon asked of the man:

“Why do you come here
to this place to find these things?”

And the man replied:

“These things are of no use to thee:
thou who neither spends the gold
nor enjoys the woman
should not have them for the keeping.”

And the dragon laughed:

“You talk as if we are
so different. For both
the joy is in the getting
and the having.

To pretend otherwise is deceitful.

To whom do you hope to lie?”

[\(Back\)](#)

Five minutes before work

Five minutes before work
I am forced by the constricting rules
of formal social conduct
to listen to this insipid hamster
of a man talk
(when all I wanted was
a cup of coffee)
about who knows what
because all I can do is watch
his nose move while he talks
and think about how maybe
his pants obscure a stubby tail
that might also be twitching like his nose,
and he mistakes the look on my face
for something else
and continues to jabber on,
only faster now,
his voice nearing a pitch
indecipherable to human ears
like mine, so
I glance at the clock
to avoid staring horror-struck
at his eyes
like black glass
reflecting the fluorescent lights,
my face grimacing,
and all I can think to do
to make this end
is to grab him
and shove him up someone's ass,
but the problem is whose,
who would enjoy that perversion
more than the perversion
from which I am suffering,
and suddenly he's finished
and walking away,
his tail clearly visible now
beneath his trousers,

and I can't think
of much worse ways
to start the day.

[\(Back\)](#)

A Cosmic Joke

I can remember thinking
“what a jerk”
“what an asshole”
“what a pompous ass”
sitting in class with
Mr. Purdy. And
now with distance
(*plenty* of time and space
although I knew it then too)
I can see him thinking
much such a thing of me.
But such
was expected of me: I
was of an age
of snap judgments
only possible with the confidence
of the young waiter in Hemingway.
How old was he
(Mr. Purdy not the waiter)?
who knows?
forty-five? sixty?
At my age then
old was just old and
old was anything
I wasn't, but now
forty-five sixty
is no longer
just a hair split
(for him now
it literally means the difference
between life and death).

Of curriculum
very little remains – oh
sure *Beowulf* and
sure some kind of
Shakespeare
(but what kind? *Lear*?
Merry Wives of Windsor?)

who knows? not I) and
outlining that whole damn book
(*A Short History of the English People*)
and splitting it up by chapters
and those too stupid
too lazy to paraphrase
getting caught while wiser
cheaters (like me)
shaking our heads in general disgust,
but they held one last fiber
of honor and no one squealed
on the rest, not one,
fine gentlemen all.
I appreciate the connection
between history and art and
literature and me
as well as anyone,
but Jesus Gladstone Disraeli
me (the young waiter)
come on!
leave it to me to make
the connection?
come on!

So curriculum is not
why this matters
to me: what matters
to me was that c
when the calculations
were being made to determine
the top English student,
but that c wasn't enough
to prevent me
from getting it
(a wooden plaque with no name),
but that wasn't enough
for him he purchased
a leather valise for the runner-up
and awarded to her
in front of me. I

was buckled (I was
the young waiter after all), but now,
now that I'm the old waiter,
now I say bravo,
now I see Ahab and the whale
(although who is who is not so clear)
spitting their last breaths to the last
stabbing from hell's heart
now I say bravo good sir, bravo;
now the old waiter,
the insomniac,
can dig that kind of crazy.
(To be fair
I want to be fair
and tell the whole truth
and nothing
but I've seen an old paper
an old essay
with some sort of a b and
I see that is not something
I accept as a b and
so it is a mystery then.)

They used to say Mr. Purdy
was a boxer, Golden Gloves,
when he was the waiter in a hurry,
but who they are I don't remember,
and I never could see it myself.
He never seemed to move
like an athlete,
like an old bull
fighter, to me;
rather, I just saw old and
old is and old never was.
They also used to say
he had problems with his legs
with his veins, and I say
good god!
what is this?
who is this Powerfuller trickster

with a sense of humor
so perverse, so cruel, so ironic, so pathetic
as to dream such a dream of me?

Thromboectomies and fistula aside,
however, even more painful
is looking out and seeing
“what a jerk”
“what an asshole”
“what a pompous ass”
where I never did before and
looking back now from hell’s heart
to the last but not seeing
the young waiter (who has everything)
turn to the old.

[\(Back\)](#)

I Forget

Are the good days the ones
when we forget the ticking clock
or the ones when we startle
every hour at the chiming?
Fixation is bad
but forgetting can be worse.
Which measure makes a day better?

[\(Back\)](#)

Parking Lot

The conversation turned to seagulls.

“They come here for the garbage,”
my companion offered.

“You’re kidding, right?”

Blinking.

“You think they fly across
the entire state of California
because our fast food wrappers
are somehow more tasty?”

More blinking.

“This all used to be inland sea,
and these bird brains still
expect to find one here.”

Blinking and staring.

A seagull turned overhead
searching perhaps
for a second opportunity
for a miracle.

Meanwhile, a hundred miles
to the east,
an ichthyosaur chafes
in its stony prison,
its fleshless toothy grin
awaiting the kiss of the sun.

[\(Back\)](#)

Brain Power

Ronald Reagan once asked
“Why should we subsidize intellectual curiosity?”
Reflecting upon this question has led me
to the curious position of agreement.
Of all the billions of species to be successful
in the history of the planet we alone
seem to have developed due to our intelligence.
We have had a good one hundred thousand year run
that may end at any time due to self-inflicted poisoning or immolation.
Both bacteria and beetles have had better runs than ours,
both beginning before and going beyond (from all indications),
and have never posed a threat to themselves.
Both because and in spite of our big brains
we have placed ourselves in this curious position.

Dinosaurs had a good one hundred thirty million year run
but could not do the math to calculate the collision
with the asteroid that killed them.
We can do the math and perhaps prevent a cataclysmic collision
with an extraterrestrial object
but lack the willpower to put away our fatal attraction
for consumption and our tribal tendencies.
Big brains or no, collision is inevitable.

[\(Back\)](#)

Greed

The unrelenting acquisition of property
seems to have no purpose beyond itself.
Squalor certainly is not pleasant,
but there reaches a point
when squalor has been left behind
and has been replaced by something
a great deal more comfortable.
Most of us are content here
with food with shelter with warmth enough,
but many are not and seek more and more
of much of the same only incrementally different.
How much more comfortable can their beds be;
how much better their sleep?
How much better can they eat?
These things alone cannot explain the drive
for their acquisition.
Their secret is that they are really
nothing more than surrogates,
stand-ins for their owners.
Their owners seek to be holdfasts
and for the things they acquire
to be the instruments of their own immortality.
It is a motive they keep hidden
even from themselves
because if they acknowledged
the source of their acquisition
it would destroy the magic spell.

A magic show is entertaining
because it creates an illusion of reality.

[\(Back\)](#)

Up and Down

I'm old school, I guess
(or maybe just old),
but I still open doors
for women and pull
out chairs for them
to sit down, and I do
most of the driving
and find myself sometimes
offering my arm
when walking together.
I discern that the women
for whom I do these things usually
accept the gesture as a matter
of course but not due,
although they seem loath to refuse it.
They and I would be quick,
however, to espouse
the equanimity of the sexes,
although they rarely make
the same gestures toward me.
I may decide to stand up
for myself with the women
with whom I work.
We share restrooms,
and they take it as a matter
of politeness that the men
lower the toilet seat
prior to exiting.
I need the seat up;
it is they who need it down,
so why must it be me
who performs this service?
Don't I do enough out
of politeness (or habit)?
I have as much to fear
from bacteria or worse
as they; I have to lift the lid
myself; why must I also

always be the one
to put it down?
Ladies, just leave it up
for us every now and then,
and I promise to lift the seat
and watch my aim when necessary.

[\(Back\)](#)

I Don't Care

Sitting on the wheeled bed
in the closet
euphemistically called a room
with a curtain for a door
giving the illusion of privacy,
the pain subsided
(although it never
really goes away:
it lurks in the shadows
in the corner
like Renfield awaiting
the bidding of his nosferatu master),
and I sat waiting
the verdict of the tests
so recently endured.
Now that my inward turn
relaxed as I felt nothing
but the fatigue of holding myself
clenched like a fist to myself
for so long,
I could hear Jimmie
through the curtain
of her stall.

Jimmie saw no point in being
held any longer;
she was ready to leave and return
to California.
The doctor told her she was
from down the street
not from California.
He was worried,
he said,
she may be bleeding internally,
he said,
and her mental status
appeared altered.

Jimmie told him
he was full of shit,
and she felt fine.
She had to get back
to her kitty-cat
in California,
she explained without
any attempt to hide her contempt.

The doctor continued his assessment.
He asked her name;
he asked her age.
He asked who
the President of the United States was.

“I don’t care,”
she replied,
tired of it all.

When they told me
I could get dressed and go home,
I fantasized
about spiriting Jimmie outside to daylight
and away to California.

I didn’t, of course.

[\(Back\)](#)

Dear Grandma

I'm kind of glad
I won't live
to see all these
twenty and thirty somethings
named Brandi and Candi
and Randi and Kelli
(and names that don't
end in i
like Sam and Madison
(isn't that the capital
of Wisconsin?)
and Alyssa and Alisha
and Alica and Alicia)
turn seventy-five.
There's just not a lot of dignity
in being a grandma
with a tramp stamp back tattoo
and a name like that.

Then again
it might just be
funny enough
to hang around to see.

What were their parents thinking?
Everybody lives forever?

[\(Back\)](#)

Reality Check

While on a hike
I was thinking about this poem
and almost stepped
on a rattlesnake basking
across the trail in the morning sun.

We've sold ourselves
on the story elevating
the importance of the life of the mind
through our inventions
of heaven and television.
I suppose it is
important on some level:
our big brains need
to be distracted by something
now that we no longer have to worry
about bringing down the woolly mammoth
and surviving.

But holy-Jesus-H-motherfucking-Christ-on-a-popsicle-stick
that rattlesnake was *real!*

(That's a lie.
I made up the snake
too.)

[\(Back\)](#)

Part Three: Meditations

(Once again, proof that lessons learned from literature can eventually be reduced to nothing more than a simple) Math Problem

It had snowed earlier
in the week, but the temperature
pushed seventy, and I took
the dogs out and up the desert
road into the hills.

The sky was blue and cloudless
with a milky haze visible
only where it met mountains.
Looking into this blue I thought
it was a mild, mild day
and a mild looking sky,
and I thought that I am
the windlass and I am
turned round and round in this world
by the handspike of fate
buried deep into my chest.

We could hear gunfire
coming from three distinct directions:
to the left over the ridge
came the sound of a shotgun,
upslope to the right
came the report of a small rifle
or perhaps a handgun,
and in the canyon at eleven o'clock
came the sound of a weapon made indistinct
by multiple echoes and ricochets
off the hills; consequently,
the dogs kept close.

I paused to observe
some ants busy at spring cleaning,
the first insects I had seen
in the year. They were engaged
in clearing the entrance
to their subterranean labyrinth
unaware of my presence

looking down at them
with the detachment of God,
or the gods, or both.
One of the dogs scampered up,
and eager to look up
into my face looking down,
she sent the ants into disarray,
and I said aloud,
“And a man said to the universe”
and I continued up the trail.

Once we had gone up
and made the turn on the other
side of the wash, I could see
the boys with the shotgun.
By their bright red pickup
and their demeanor,
I could easily tell
they were in their twenties,
though I could not see
their faces at this distance.
I could see they could see
me, but the one with the shotgun
continued firing even after
I was within his field of fire.
Finally, he raised the weapon
skyward when I and the dogs
were close to directly opposite,
and I could tell from the way
he handled himself and the shotgun
that his recklessness came
from the arrogance of youth,
from the confidence of one
who has never seen accident
at work and so could not
conceive of the danger
of accident, and I thought
what young fools to be
out wasting the day
shooting at nothing,

but I quickly remembered that
summer is icumen in
lode sing cuccu, and
bulluc stertþ, and
that there is no fool
like an old fool and
such a day was perfect
for such a thing
for young men such as they
and if I had been
a young man I
would likely have joined them.

I and the dogs were on
the final incline before
the rather steep descent
back into the houses
when I saw a bird,
not a cuckoo nor solitary thrush,
but a scrub jay unusually quiet
watching us while perched
on a boulder some way off
the trail like a gargoyle
above a city, and I realized
that except for the ants
I had seen no other animals.
I had not expected to find
a snake stretched out in the sand
near the trail like a bathing beauty
in the sun at the beach
(it was much too early for that),
but usually the dogs spooked
jackrabbits or cottontails
or the odd ground squirrel or covey of quail.
Today there was only this oddly
quiet jay watching me watching him.

After cresting I could see the grid
of roads and roof of my own
house, and as I trudged

downslope I was glad
that I take the time at this time
every year to read
about the loveliest of trees,
only now I cannot help
inverting the equation
at its center.
My wife (with help from our son)
planted a cherry tree
in our front yard
this March directly
opposite the large window,
and although there are no
blossoms there will be
and I am glad
because there are no woodlands
here and twenty years
is certainly little room.

[\(Back\)](#)

Monkey Business

The difference between
what I said and
what I should have said,
what I meant to say,
suspended in the space
between us anomalous,
like a miniature Ort cloud
sending out comets
spiraling to destroy planets.

(I am become death;
I am Shiva, Destroyer of Worlds.)

We eyed each other
carefully in the pause
both looking for the other
to make the first move
toward reconciliation.
It was a good place
to end, but
neither was willing
to show the weakness
of being the first,
so both decided to continue
although both were past
any purpose in doing so.

This refusal hammered home
how utterly petty, prideful
creatures we are.
A dog would never
act this way, but
we are so concerned
with maintaining and manipulating
our social status,
even among those to whom
we have declared
our social status

means nothing to us,
that we cannot help ourselves.

Keith Chen, a Yale researcher,
introduced the concept of money
to a group of capuchin monkeys.
His experiments showed the decisions
made by the capuchins were
“statistically indistinguishable
from most stock-market investors.”
The monkey lab was shut down,
however, when it was discovered
that male monkeys
were giving female monkeys
money (which they could exchange
for food treats) for sex.

Those in charge felt
the experiment was causing
irreparable damage
to the capuchin monkey
social structure.

[\(Back\)](#)

Animal Heart

Her areolas were like two silver dollar pancakes
from Jack's in Bishop;
her breasts would provide their own applause
when she walked naked through the house;
from her lips to her hips to her fingertips
everything jumped and jived and shimmied
with the raw rhythm of the wild wide world.
Watching her move I could feel a circuit
trip in my brain switching over to something without language
so that I would have had trouble with my own name
if there had been somebody to ask me.
Part of me knew: this is the source of the all:
aesthetics to algebra to amalgamation,
the tripping of the circuit to something infinitely more
important than any cogent response.
There was no cultural interpretation or interference
of any kind only the simplicity at its core and essence
and nothing more.
All this sound and fury really does signify nothing
beyond its own purpose unto itself,
and we are little more than the vehicle for this
grand and universal expression of meaning.
Despite what we may think, it is only in those moments
of non-thinking that our true nature is revealed.

[\(Back\)](#)

Valentine

You could give flowers, of course;
flowers carry the connotation
of beauty and fragrance but
the scent can be cloying
in the uncirculated air
of winter,
and they tell you
diamonds are forever but
eternity seems a bit
presumptuous for something
so fragile
as promised monogamy.
Besides you should be able
to do better than a bird:
bower birds give shiny
objects and flowers and
do a little dance besides.
Chocolate is closer:
it releases the same endorphins,
the brain chemicals that mimic
feeling because they are feeling.
Of course birds give
gifts of food as well,
but their gifts speak only
of providing
not of feeling.
It should be enough to declare
“I reaffirm our pair bond,”
like birds do after a journey,
perhaps over
the sea or through it,
by craning and dipping
necks and fencing with bills,
but such declarations are not
considered romantic,
although you would be hard pressed
to define what that
really means.

We have our own
subtle dancing,
sometimes accompanied by preening
and squawking, but most
often consisting of gestures
innocuous to others
but pregnant with meaning
to us.

No, you would do best
to stick with the conventional
since explanation
is doomed to fall short,
but know
that the synchronized breathing
in the dark,
the careless arm or leg
carelessly caressing,
the touch of reassurance,
say more
by saying less
than flowers, diamonds, or candy,
or even corporate poetry.

[\(Back\)](#)

On Blindness

I learned something new today:
Staring at the bathroom floor
I noticed some tiles were chipped
(gouged, actually).
At first I thought it was dirt
until I rubbed the marks
with my fingers,
then I knew the truth.
I realized these marks
were not at all new,
and I realized I had stared at this floor
thousands of times over
many years in the exercise
of biology and not seen
what was right
before my eyes.
I had looked in every light
permutation possible;
I had squinted at the very spot
and made the square pattern
yield its round illusion;
I had made mathematics
by splitting the floor
into regular and irregular
polygons and calculated areas;
but I had not before seen these marks.

At first it frightened me
to think of all the possible things
I have missed before my eyes,
and I must have over-compensated
a little for a time
and saw chimeras – untied
shoelaces and the pattern of a diamond
back rattlesnake in rocks
at an impossible distance.
But then I relaxed
as I was bathed in the recognition

that it is our normal condition
not to see.

I read that we are blind
in the center of our field of vision
where our optic nerves attach
and that our brains
just fill in these spots for us
with an estimation, a guess,
of what should be there.
If it is a part of our essential biology,
what is there to be afraid of?
There is nothing in the dark
that is not in the light.

[\(Back\)](#)

Betrayal

You sit and stare at nothing
just past your feet
toward the broad bathroom door,
and the tubes and wires
rein you in like so much livery
to remind you you are not yourself:
you are the sum of the gauges and readouts:
you are your test results and nothing
more than a chart with a name,
and they are mechanically kind
during their visitations,
and they speak your name
in tones apologetic for the delay:
“Sorry to disturb you” or
“This’ll just take a second,”
and you smile wanly in pathetic
fake stoicism and make some lame joke
that you both pretend to be funny,
although when you stop staring at nothing
in particular and focus for a moment
at the door which is like a window
to the hallway beyond
and the passersby who cannot help
themselves and must look in
like at a carnivore at the zoo,
but they try not to be obvious
and make it look accidental,
but you two make eye contact
just the same for a fleeting second
but long enough to recognize
the assessment, the conclusion,
the apprehension and fear,
and the helpless eyes of the carnivore
at the zoo that would attack with tooth and claw
if only given the chance,
and so you look back at nothing
and wish you could lie
on your side or your stomach

just for a little while,
just for a little change,
but that is simply not possible –
you have no choice –
and while this is not the final humiliation,
it is nevertheless one of them,
and so you are blessed:
you are given a gift of foresight:
you are the ghost
of Christmas-yet-to-come,
you are an actor
and this is dress rehearsal
which will improve the final performance
because you now know
where the marks and the beats are
and can deliver your lines at the proper time,
so you are fortunate
because for many it is a bad improvisation
but you know what is expected,
and no one shows you how to work
this damned thing,
they just hand it to you and tell you
to use it if you need to,
but this is not intuitive to you,
this is not natural,
and so you make yourself
into an even bigger mess,
and you want to scream obscenities
at the circumstance, at the humiliation,
at the banality,
but you don't,
you just stare at nothing.

[\(Back\)](#)

Goodfellas

How could I have thought
my mind controls my body?
My body submits
to this yoke of tyranny
of being ordered
from place to place, thing to thing,
but it merely yields.

As if to teach me
the heart of the real power,
it awakens me
in the dark of the predawn
and dares me to think
I can return to my sleep
without permission.

I say “me” because
“we” cannot be the pronoun
for so unwilling
and so strange antecedents.
Body refuses
the “we” and insists upon
singularity.

The royal pronoun
cannot exist when revolt
is the state of things.
The root of reality,
for both internal
and external politics,
lies in the consent.

So it is my mind
who must learn the submission,
must learn to revel
in the state of how things are,
because in the end
it won't be the mind at all

choosing its demise.

This situation
is only Jimmy the Gent
with the cord around
the throat of the wig-maker
repeating “today”
while demanding his money.
That is all it is.

[\(Back\)](#)

Schism

We coexist
like separate panes of glass in a window
both filtering the same light
but each with a slightly different view,
but that doesn't mean the body wants
what the mind wants:
the guts are nuts:
they're out of control,
they raise their own hell.

We two
chained as prisoners cutting the high grass
along the steaming Mississippi roadside.
Sometimes one prisoner falls,
sometimes the other,
but both are required to pick up the slack,
to make the same distance in miles,
or the walkin' boss will put both
in the box for the night
(and nobody wants that), but
sooner or later
one prisoner or the other falls,
sooner or later
the miles won't,
and the one left standing can't do it
alone anymore.

We are married to ourselves,
wedded to this certain uncertainty.
We wake ourselves in the night
when one turns over.
We look at other marriages happier (perhaps)
than our own and we marvel:
Jesus! Together all those years
without killing each other!
Then again, sometimes we only stay together
for the kids, just holding the groan
until they are grown

then relaxing into ourselves.

This wretched elasticity can only last so long
before something snaps.

We look for clues, but the answers
only further illustrate the problem.
For some it was one way for some it was the other:
Jon and Fred Willie, crazy as fruit bats,
colliding wildly under a streetlight
while a twisted twelve-year-old tosses car keys
to heighten the madness while inside the bedroom
poor K_____ languishes while contemplating his own effacing.
Meanwhile, Ernie and Bill share the porch swing
and pass a bottle of scotch between them
enjoying the shadows made by the leaves.
(No, this is not a gentlemen only club –
don't forget Ginny and her pockets full of stones –
it is just that the ladies are not invited to the pregame tailgate party.)

Which way did that rubberband finally snap for Ernie?
Good old Ernie was really not that old.
Both halves must have whispered to him in the night,
one saying he had nothing left to say,
the other wracked with too much of this of that of the other,
but in the end it was one or the other
that made the difference, that closed the deal,
to put out the light and then put out the light.

On the subject of marriage,
one must conclude Othello was right to do
what he had to do.
Desdemona was from Venice after all
and just because she hadn't betrayed him yet
she was sure to betray him eventually, so
he might as well get rid of the bitch
sooner than later.

[\(Back\)](#)

What's a Grecian Urn?

Some advise moderation
(some say the world will end in fire),
some counsel a middle path
(some say in ice),
too much of anything
is too much,
they say,
as they warn you not
to get too excited.

Sure – excess can kill
you dead, can drop you
like a bad habit
by lung cancer,
by cirrhosis,
by obesity,
by AIDS,
by madness,
bye bye folks,
but it doesn't have to
come through too much;
temperate people
buy the farm every single day
by car accident,
by avalanche,
by earthquake,
by house fire,
by embolism.
The truth is
the check-out time is not posted;
one day the maid knocks,
and that's that.

As a youth I remember
reading in *Playboy*
(I can't say why
I was reading)
that according to the French

the perfect size and shape
for a female breast
is a champagne glass,
that anything that spills
over is just a waste.
Irony aside (for a moment),
I say, hey!
I'm an American, damnit!
If it spills over,
get a bigger glass –
whether we're talking
about booze or boobs.
I was raised to gorge
myself on Thanksgiving
and call it a holiday.

You'll live longer,
they say,
if you watch what
you say eat and do,
and that may be true,
but toward what end?
A few more years at the end?
For never having eaten
a pastrami sandwich?

The ancient Greeks believed
everyone ended up
in the underworld,
which wasn't really hell,
they just didn't have a heaven.
Nevertheless, it was hell
to them because life meant
the body
and eternity without
food fighting and fucking
was one eternity too many.

Frost was no one to recommend
moderation, unless you mean

recommend in the do
as I say not as I do variety
like somebody's mother.
By all accounts
he was out of control,
whether brandishing handguns
or starting fires,
and he still lived
to end up looking like
Winnie the Pooh
tucked into his winter overcoat.

Better take a lesson from Keats,
but not about Greeks;
rather, remember he
dropped dead before thirty
and order bacon on that burger.

[\(Back\)](#)

The Godfather, I & II

A friend felt I had betrayed him
and in his anger he called me Fredo
fully understanding
both the drunken, inept, bungling Fredo
and the conniving, ambitious, duplicitous Fredo
since they are really one and the same.
He also knew I knew what he intended
in calling me Fredo,
and so in spite of my genuine remorse for my slight
which he took so deeply
I grew angry in return and we refused
to speak for some time.
I said a friend out of habit since a better word
might be acquaintance
because friends do not call each other Fredo.
A friend is more than a brother
since friends are brothers of choice not accident
and so friends forgive our sins more readily than others.
Of course Fredo was Michael's brother
which made the betrayal all the more despicable,
indefensible and thus being called Fredo
all the more provocative.
Even now I won't go fishing with this acquaintance
and yet I have friends who I've beat on the head
with a garbage can lid like Sonny did to Carlo
but would never dream of calling them Fredo.

And so now it is clear
why Aristotle explained
art is mimesis of life
not life itself.

[\(Back\)](#)

Snowfall

While looking out the window
at snow falling and beginning
to stick and frost the edges
of things, turning them
from the most common, the ordinary
transformed into something new,
something with angles and shapes
never seen before,
it bothers me to think
my wife may suddenly burst
into tears about some Michael Furey
about whom I know nothing.
Poor Gabriel – he thought he was
happy, he thought he was
going to get laid that night,
and with that snowfall
the world spun into an alien
understanding from which it could
never return. Furies of my wife
to which I am accustomed
do not trouble me; it is the unknown
within the known that bring
the epiphany, that shade and color
that which we thought we knew,
although there is little
more beautiful than falling snow
in moonlight.

[\(Back\)](#)

Valparaiso

I find myself wishing I had traveled more;
real travel, not here in the states,
the states where pretty much everything
eventually is the same,
and not Mexico, or at least not
the Mexico I have traveled to,
a Mexico where Spanish is at best optional.
No, real travel to somewhere like Valparaiso.
I have seen Valparaiso on tv,
in photographs,
and I have seen how the mountain
with its collection of buildings
that is the town
slopes steeply from the peaks
in a steady flow to the sea
where I can see the slope
continue under the sea;
there is no California beach, but
the mountain continues
after the water begins.
This collection of buildings
that is the town
bears bright colors, or once bright colors,
faded like your wardrobe after a thousand washings,
and I wonder who had the idea, the forethought,
of these blues, reds, yellows,
or did they just happen?

I would like also to visit Scotland,
the land of my people,
or the people I like to think of as mine,
although my desire to see Scotland
has nothing to do with Bobby Burns' haggis;
in fact, one could say I would like to visit Scotland
in spite of this terrible engine of offal.
On the other hand, the tuna so lovingly described by Neruda
has everything to do with my desire to see Valparaiso
where the mountain with its rush of faded color

flowing in slow eruption from the sea
and the tuna growls
along with my impatient stomach
as they wait for me to learn Spanish.

[\(Back\)](#)