

RIC AMANTE



*Ferry Tales
and other poems*

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R A I B O O K S N U M B E R T W O

Ray Soulard, Jr., Series Editor

Ferry Tales
and other poems

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MALDEN, MASSACHUSETTS



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for Ray, again

FERRY TALES AND OTHER POEMS

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Contents

Ferry Tales

Prologue	1
At the Ferry Terminal.....	2
Tidemarks	3
Aboard the Sealth	5
Reciprocity	6
Two Ships Passing.....	7
Whitman's Deckhand.....	9
What the Whore Told Me on the Pier	10
A View from the Stern	11
Of Water Birds (And Others).....	12
Wake of the Chinook	14
On the Ferry — Alone Together	15
Just This.....	18
Fragments of a Late-century Crossing	19
Epilogue	21

and other poems

Two Variations on One Rant	25
When I See You Again.....	29
Poker in Maine	30
Mother and I.....	31
In a Field, Clouds Passing.....	33
At Radio's Edge.....	34
My Life as a Wine Label.....	35
And the Heart Says.....	36
Drunk at the Stove	37
Not That, But This	38
Because Love Sometimes Feels Mortal	40
For Ginsberg	41
Because.....	42
Air And Light.....	43
The Death of Mr. Quimby	44
Picture Window, Good Acid, or Jersey Book of the Dead.....	46
Summer Solstice	47
Old Man on a Bench.....	49
Daybreak in the Shack	51
Gone in Lawrence	52
Ramble	55

Ferry Tales

Prologue

Leave on the far shore
your demons behind. . .
Stand on the stern
as the ferry departs
and thank them for dying
while still there is time. . .

Henceforth a new drink
potent and clear
to be drunk every evening
in lieu of cheap beer. . .
And yes there were lessons
they had to impart —
but whither the shadows,
whither the art?

Just leave at the shoreline
your demons behind
lest the God who propels you
you'll never quite find. . .

At the Ferry Terminal

The lights too bright,
the mother screaming,
the interest in things metaphysical
burrowing a bent path
through the dirt in the corner. . .

A small boy in a purple shirt
sneaks a peek
into the bag
of the magician —
a puff of smoke
smelling of cedar and lye
rises from the crowns
of the sleepwalkers. . .

And so it is —
episodes of vision
vie with workaday fears —
until the bright, screaming
purple boy
points a nervous finger
at the shrouded moon,
and whispers again,
cool and fawn-like —
“Let it all go. . .“

Tidemarks

“Forever hunted and haunted
by the chill waters and deft pull
of the tides. . . .”

Low tide —
shore exposed,
mind exposed —
everything and nothing. . .

Footprints in sand
near pilings neglected —
bed of pink petals
asleep in the heel. . .

Wake of a speedboat
lapping the shore —
disturbance, resolution,
calm. . .

Don't need no speedboat
to give me some speed —
world is always
racing. . .

On the hillside
of the far shore
Scotch broom rampant —
yellow, color of madness. . .

Sipping red wine
along with my tears —
there goes the ferry
and people I love. . .

Birds in the branches
whistling and cawing —
existence,
musical and brief . . .

Pissing clear piss
into porous beach-sand —
no need
to move the legs . . .

A stand of madronas
clothes the ravine —
elegant balm
for land and eye . . .

At the edge of the water
the water does whisper —
“deeper the water,
higher the wave. . .”

Kingfisher perched
atop dead piling —
his search food,
mine, beauty. . .

Cotton-white clouds
boil over pines —
sensual, surreal,
perfect. . .

Lingering lonesome
with sun, sea, and shadow —
such the best days
of every man-child. . .

Aboard the Sealth

How exquisite, then,
the gentle dissimulation
as the drunk approaches the bar
for a pony-glass of house-red,
all the while tittering
at the bulging wineskin
pressed like a second liver
against his warm spine. . .
But this bar slides keenly over water,
is the galley of a ferry
serving up small comestibles
yet rollicking ponies —
purveyor of many
a fey crossing. . .

Out the rain-streaked window
Tahoma
is a blur and a shout
and an old tribal hymn
he sang in a life before this —
a snow-capped banner and flame
belying the dream
of its lasting caress. . .

So he swallows the blood
of the unrepentant,
spits up some blood of his own,
falls in a quiet heap
upon the lap of God. . .
His time is shattered
and splits lengthwise
across the broken slats
and trailing wake
of any drunken vessel —
of which the Sealth
and he are now one. . .

Reciprocity

A young girl stretches
 a bare arm
 up to the sky —
 tiptoes to get even closer. . .
 She feeds the day
 by feeding the bay
 by feeding a gull
 a timorously-held
 stalk of fried potato —
 and the bold white bird
 swoops clean and sure,
 hovers then enters
 a range of delight
 as its agile beak pivots
 and tears grace
 from her giving hand. . .

Two Ships Passing

Awesome and foreboding
 when a huge freighter
 slides into the sound,
 tugs fixed tightly
 to its burnt-orange hull
 like lampreys on a host. . .
 No crew ever visible —
 a ghost ship
 run by a bank of computers
 in downtown Monrovia. . .
 Decks stacked four-high
 with a patchwork of containers
 laden with hunting vests,
 AA batteries, shampoo, floorlamps. . .

And he's worked unloading
 these containers,
 hauled down broken boxes
 hours on end —
 then the shiny back-wall when empty,
 a momentary sigh
 of accomplishment and release
 until the next metal seal is cut,
 heavy iron doors swung open,
 and his heart and muscles
 spill out on the dock
 like grain from a bag. . .

Against his body's knowledge,
 he resonates
 to the brute grace of a freighter —
 rushes to the rail
 whenever one passes,
 yields fully to the beauty
 of the curve of the bow,
 to the beauty
 of the curve
 of the bow. . .

Whitman's Deckhand

I look to the wordless intelligence
 in his weathered face,
 remark the blossoming gray hairs
 yet responsible strength,
 catch the clean finesse
 of lines lashed taut and proper,
 watch him watching
 the black waters and white birds,
 fathom his doubts and joys
 as commensurate with mine,
 step to the side of the rail
 disconsolate and wondrous,
 hear his calm words,
 feel his rough grip —
 return to the bench,
 withstand our passage. . .

What the Whore Told Me on the Pier

I saw a seal playin' in the water
 but was too sad to appreciate it. . .
 I seen seaworms in the water yesterday —
 means the whales are coming through. . .
 They always travel ahead of the whales
 then get eaten — they're pretty stupid. . .
 I was watchin' a beautiful sunset last night
 but had to leave when my bus came. . .
 Get my check tomorrow —
 can't wait to get my own pack of smokes
 and a cup of coffee. . .
 I love coffee, candy, and cigarettes —
 good thing they don't kill you
 or I'd been dead a long time ago. . .

A View from the Stern

Mountains on all sides
 brushed thick with snow and sunlight,
 bearers of a visceral gift
 pressing upon the retina
 a calm, heroic plight. . .
 But these are merely mountains —
 a cigarette squeezed tight
 between index and middle finger
 is equal anodyne. . .
 And between mountains and cigarette
 vast aggregations of mystic spit
 meteorologists are wont to call clouds —
 look and see
 how their borders and bellies
 drift, surge, and block
 the passing shapes
 of a startling grid!
 Women in white veils
 and men in black robes
 pace their cool and weightless rounds
 within these streaming halls. . .
 Or,
 as Brother Raymond says,
 "It's not what's out there,
 it's what you see. . ."

Of Water Birds (and Others)

The cormorant spreads angled wings
to a low-lying sun —
pelagic, heraldic, Mesozoic —
tremble and adore
the breadth and hush
of the reptile brain. . .

A grebe is part swan, part cobra —
bloodshot eyes, stiletto bill,
crisp black-and-white attire —
the mafioso of waterfowl. . .

When Canada Geese slurry
in a long, low vee overhead,
and their ancient cry
wounds heart and sky —
now is never more now-like. . .

Atop a rotted piling
a great blue heron
waits and watches,
watches and waits —
lifts off with one
long, slow flap. . .

An oversized head,
like the buffalo,
hence bufflehead —
a duck whose cranium
explodes with joy
each time it breaks
still water. . .

Jabbing the air
with its dagger-like bill,
perturbing the air
with an agitated rattle —
hectoring, skittish kingfisher. . .

And birds imagined
but seldom seen —
roc, phoenix, simurgh —
I close my eyes
and know them all. . .

Wake of The Chinook

Like a green-and-white water bug,
 The Chinook skims
 across the ocean's surface —
 its wake a riled meringue,
 its wake an emerald meadow,
 its wake a rampant beauty. . .
 And is it unreasonable
 to wish myself one
 with the surge of churning water,
 to feel my vibrant cells
 more at home
 in such pure and lovely welter
 than the static frame
 they now inhabit?
 Gazing at the wake
 I surrender bone and distance,
 rest dear and deep
 in the wild wash
 I came from. . .

On the Ferry — Alone Together

“In the brightening scope
 of day's immensity,
 awareness shifts to particulars
 lest the mind bloom unchecked
 in a less than tranquil way. . .”

I

So observe that young man —
 lanky left arm
 stretched and pressed
 close to the body
 like picket to post,
 quivering right hand
 holding back a smoke,
 ribs like a greyhound
 corrugating the cloth
 of a thin, black jersey. . .
 Eyes connect briefly
 when you look his way,
 and yes,
 you're happy for him —
 his once-broken nose,
 many-skewed loves,
 black hair damped
 with comb-strokes
 moments ago. . .

II

She's eating popcorn
 in a most raw and elegant way. . .
 Long and garish nails
 dive into the tub
 (pertly balanced on bare knee)
 like hungry minnows,
 then each kernel hovers
 before full and painted lips
 for a breathless eternity,
 allowing all to savor
 the delay and delight
 of food desired, held, consumed. . .
 She's aware of her power,
 performs the act coolly —
 the air around her blisters. . .

III

Iron-gray spray of rain
 whips in from the bow
 as an unshaven man of twenty
 in tattered shortsleeves
 maniacally strides
 port to starboard,
 starboard to port,
 flailing both arms
 and dipping from the waist
 like a busted jack-in-the-box. . .
 Within the cabin,
 passengers nap, chat, deal cards —
 here on the brink,
 some high, keen panic. . .

IV

On the smoking deck of the ferry
 people congregate in genial knots,
 embalmed in the amber
 of setting sun. . .
 Hard to think that
 we were ever meant
 to do otherwise. . .
 And why shouldn't this tableau
 be the right one,
 the one of illumination and ease
 that favors all embodiment. . .

Just This

Tonight life is tolerant —
 miscues and shadows evaporate
 in the heat of prayer. . .
 And the ferries will come and go;
 Lorelei or moonlight bruise the soul. . .
 Tonight we track a wider path
 and ride free —
 no judgment,
 no peril,
 just the nighttime breeze —
 always rising,
 always moving along. . .

Fragments of a Late-century Crossing

I

Reflected city-light
 daubs the underbellies
 of low-lying clouds,
 and beneath this
 soft red dread
 skyscrapers —
 fabled, benign —
 no harm in buildings
 when part of a dream. . .

II

Sailing away from the city —
 tips of the conifers
 a rough castle-wall
 pitch-black and spiked
 against the fire in the sky. . .

III

On the curve out of Rich Passage
 a shudder from the stern —
 engines grumble most animate,
 a gray whale fixes below,
 houselights pock the hills. . .

IV

Sipping his wine he watches the ferry —
 a jewel-box on black silk. . .
 Sometimes the glide of a ferry,
 sometimes the cry of a seabird,
 sometimes a gaze to the other side. . .

V

(From his soundless lair
on the ocean's floor,
Poseidon rakes the frowns and bones
of contrary life and thought,
then leads the whelkins through. . .)

VI

Everything ratcheted a notch,
everything fantastic and so —
the ferry now airborne
upon the whale's broad back,
both floating like dirigibles,
both quick with transcendence. . .

VII

And lovers on the bow
fuse flesh with farewell —
the whale gently naps,
ship's radar keeps spinning. . .

VIII

And this is heaven, Hart —
gulls flight enough
and death not an anchor. . .

And this isn't easy, dear —
pain raids the brain
on the last ferry home. . .

And this is Brooklyn, Walt —
the red and white lights
pinpoint your love. . .

And this never ends, does it —
You bathe us in chaos
as elegance deepens. . .

Epilogue

See in this blue light
your full Love refined. . .
Kiss at the pier
as the ferry slides in
and hold Her all evening
while still there is time. . .

Henceforth a new star
naked and dear
to be plumbed in the darkness
in lieu of a tear. . .
And yes there are toxins
corroding the heart —
but whither the shadows,
whither the art?

Just see through this starlight
a full love refined
lest the worlds that attract you
you'll never quite find. . .

and other poems

Two Variations on One Rant

(For Bill)

I

I'm unplugging the phone,
smashing the alarm,
allowing myself to retreat
and advance
as far as the silence
will take me. . .
I'm pouring gold oil
on the cracks in my fingers,
old hymns
in the cracks of my mind,
red wine
through the cracks in my molars. . .
I'm finishing this cigarette
and then lighting another,
and with each inhalation
I suck in Blake,
each exhalation
blow out Keats,
suck in and blow out
angels, birds, deaths —
a nearness to otherness
that suffers then decides
with the surging bliss
of a storm-tossed wave. . .

I once thought,
 I once thought —
 I've abandoned thought for feeling,
 and my trick left knee
 is in search of a poultice
 in search of a circus
 in search of energy
 present and posthumous —
 a candle slow-burning on a mantle,
 a prayer imploding in darkness
 a corpse upsetting a habit —
 and it could be visual
 could be sonic could be severe
 could be now could be later
 a hard slap of stars
 a soft brush of flesh
 whatever it takes
 wherever it's going
 there goes the money
 there goes the view
 there goes the neighborhood. . .
 But I'm breathing I'm alive
 I'm close to something
 it has no name
 it begat me it will have me
 I bless it I drink it I praise it
 and these words mean nothing —
 nothing
 nothing
 not one damn
 little thing
 at all. . .

II

It's about 43°,
 and I'm drinking a 24 oz. can of beer
 beneath the salmon-colored brick archway
 of a church on a hill. . .
 I light a match,
 move my face closer
 to the heavy glass
 that separates me from the vestibule —
 get the cigarette lit. . .
 In the distance
 people stroll, laugh, press along
 to the next vapid film. . .
 I prefer to remain open, cracked, vital —
 appreciative of the gray rain
 daubing scant winter leaves. . .
 I drop to my knees
 and face a new direction —
 as old as a muezzin,
 fresh as a train whistle,
 close and cold
 as the rough stone
 I lay my head upon. . .
 And I chant —
 explosively,
 reverentially,
 unequivocally —
 "God of touch
 God of learning
 God of remembrance —
 I offer You my frail bones,
 my partial understanding,
 my pot of blue trust. . ."

Vast and continuous
 this embrace and detach
 of evening air,
 yet I know
 choice clouds at daybreak
 will invite birds to reappear,
 strange dreams bedside
 bestir the cosmos. . .
 Were there a word,
 I'd have it —
 Were there a path,
 I'd make myself proper. . .
 And what of
 love, death, wonder?
 I drink in gracious peace
 before closed church doors. . . .

When I See You Again

Surround me with the scent
 of the truth we do share
 with the scent of your flesh
 as only you know it. . .
 Suspend me in the clear
 penetration of tears
 that cuts through the darkness
 we have scattered about. . .
 Surprise and apprise me
 of the blinding blue stars
 that crowd the night sky
 of your previous vision. . .
 Supply me unending
 with the faith of your whisper
 that coy little bird
 at the edge of the pillow. . .
 Regard me a new song
 fragile and keen
 that burns more than addition
 omission or habit. . .
 Hazard a wonder
 a world or a word
 break it up bring it out
 say it say softly
 with eyes lips and silence
 here's the once-only meeting
 we can't overlook. . .

Poker in Maine

Late afternoon
 a half-hour before dusk
 and the edge of the sky
 is pink,
 sweet,
 silent. . .
 I sit at a plywood table
 with a coyote,
 the Buddha,
 a bowl of fresh-fallen snow. . .
 Coyote bares his teeth
 and raises three slender chips
 cut from the bark of moonlight. . .
 Buddha lights a smoke,
 rags on about desire,
 suffering, death, right-betting —
 checks. . .
 Elemental and lovely,
 soundless and slow,
 the snow sees and raises,
 melts and vanishes. . .
 I drain my drink,
 lay down my cards,
 fold. . .

Mother and I

Mother has an antique martini shaker
 and carefully pours bottom-shelf gin
 over a junkpile of ice-cubes,
 next passes dry vermouth
 across restless gin,
 then takes a clear glass wand
 and gives a good rocky stir
 before raising the stainless steel capsule
 above wrinkled shoulders
 for an aerobic flurry or two,
 after which silvery concoction
 slides like mercury into beaker
 into still and glittering glasses
 disturbed with the weight of three olives —
 and there the elixir briefly resides
 until I hoist this vessel of homecoming
 and toast the destiny and dream
 that lurks in crushed juniper. . .

And here a mood opens up —
 a vapor, transparency, surrender —
 as I jump to the bad Sears phonograph
 and lay a scratchy Sinatra album
 around the thin metal spike
 then jerk back to vinyl kitchen chair
 and take a good long drink
 of mother's eyes
 quivering with Prozac, gin, and enchantment
 wondering just what she sees
 just where she is

just what anyone perceives and shares
 across an old kitchen table
 after so many comings and goings
 and long in-betweens —
 but we merge in this moment
 we complete one another
 two salty, wayward forces
 simmering like garlic and oil
 in the blistered cast-iron skillet
 stirring the blood and dirt of family
 then reducing it all
 to this gin-soaked Eucharist
 where Mother is Son is Other is One
 under swirling fluorescent light
 within elderly low-income flat
 now both singing
 to Sinatra in the corner
 not quite yet ready
 to switch to red wine. . .

In a Field, Clouds Passing

Flat on my back
 gazing straight up
 wide open to the emblems
 of God's chance designs —
 a plumed cougar
 stalking hares
 under ample blue skies. . .
 And in the bronzed spruce
 fresh strength
 from a raven,
 in the November pond
 solemn beatitude. . .
 Not so much
 what we know
 as how we receive. . .
 Not so much
 when we die
 as how we leave. . .
 Not the mind's old armor
 but the cougar's sure leap. . .

At Radio's Edge

I listen to Gregorian chant,
 not knowing or needing to know
 what notion of God
 it swerves and dives for. . .
 I just pick up the dark beauty,
 beauty hived then sprung
 from a blood-red vortex. . .
 A terminal, wired passion
 that throttles the mind,
 scorches the spine. . .
 Joy and sorrow enmeshed,
 layered, lashed. . .
 Not words off the tongue
 but swells pushing, crashing,
 breaking down thick cloister walls,
 releasing an ache and urgency
 too pure and too bright
 to abide. . .

My Life as a Wine Label

A frenetic, elegant, trashy bouquet redolent of train stations, library stairwells, one-night stands. . . An excellent and swarthy compliment to sunset ferry rides, urban perambulations, spontaneous manifestoes. . . From the volcanic fecundity of Sicily, a rollicking yet grave vintage compatible with Christian, Moor, or Jew. . . Garnet, fervid, and tatterdemalion viscous, the perfect accompaniment to a tarantella, a high tea, a housewarming. . . Aged in oaken casks, broken spats, Blakean vats, a metempsychotic beverage bold and bracing in this life and eloquently resigned to the next. . . Hints of manna, wormwood, and ambergris, with a long and delectably Taoist finish . . . Best when served freely, nightly, ecstatically at any temperature on any continent for any reason. . . A perennial antidote to ennui, acedie, and churlishness, the ideal libation for arrivals, departures, and unfettered trespass through the Void. . . Salud!

And the Heart Says

It could be on a sunny day like today —
 gulls mewling overhead,
 a delivery truck idling nearby,
 a faint breeze pushing curls of smoke
 horizontally down the alley. . .
 It could be a day like today
 when Death ambles up to you
 asking for directions, some change, the time —
 and you tell Him, eye to eye —
 whatever you want, I have. . .
 wherever we're going, I'm ready. . .
 however it happens, I'm here
 to be led away from something
 I loved but never quite understood
 to something I've never quite understood
 but will love in the same way
 I've taken this light and this time
 and moved within its silence,
 grown beneath its shadows,
 made ready to enter its life. . . .

Drunk at the Store

I've drunk 63,000,000 bottles
 of dubious red wine
 in the company of demons, lovers,
 gods, and twilights,
 and know that our hearts
 are undying orphans
 as comfortable or distraught
 in this life as any other. . .
 Enlightenment I'm leery of —
 I'd sooner talk about the way
 sunlight nicks banks of February snow
 or phonecalls that never arrive. . .
 I see two eyes
 then two eyes more
 then all the eyes
 of those flowers and nights
 good music tries to see,
 and suddenly hear that music
 through the mere act
 of looking outward. . .

Consciousness is like oil on the skillet
 covering each slope and scrape
 waiting for the food to drop —
 and drop it does
 sizzling and speaking out
 saying this the one moment
 that enfolds, blesses, releases all
 again and again and again. . .

Not That, But This

(for Mark)

God is not a blade of doubt
 that hacks and slashes flesh and mind
 but the breath and blood of gathering
 enamored of each little shout. . .
 God is not the slip and glide
 from sleep to work to sleep again
 but the spellbound ship
 of shine and release
 rushing on rails of open water. . .
 God is not dishrag sour and sodden
 but Terpsichore taut and radiant
 replaying the dream of existence
 from graveyard to rooftop. . .
 God is not the horizon
 dark with smoke of burning lots
 but map of mapless love
 crisscrossed with paths
 of drunken prophets. . .
 God is not the address
 at which you receive mail
 but the wavelength at which
 you embody change. . .
 God is not the sulphur and salt
 you have wrapped and bound
 to early wounds
 but the lasting gouge
 of sex and language
 uprooting the pain
 we sow so deeply. . .

God is not whimper or sneer,
 projection, tear or payment
 but full-bore night sky
 bursting all sight
 within its meshed lattice
 of darkness and light. . .
 God is not tavern or clinic,
 snakepit or mansion,
 but door of dimensionless bliss
 swinging on silent hinges
 for all its wayward tenants. . .
 God is not this, not that,
 say the wise and weary Hindus,
 God is not that, but this,
 say the wild and winsome boys —
 a rare and holy chance
 to evaporate fully
 like a songbird
 into time. . .

Because Sometimes Love Feels Mortal

Last night and this morning
 a sweetness fills my bones. . .
 Your lingering graces
 (the new flowers on the counter)
 push through the air
 to replenish all we have been. . .
 We were in the same place
 at the same time
 drinking wine and laughing —
 the room slanted with awareness. . .
 As I head for the phone
 to thank you again
 for the flowers,
 the colors,
 the life,
 a tear crashes up through my hand. . .

For Ginsberg

Allen you're all in, alone, at one
 releasing queer grasp
 scattering word's ash
 on Whitman, Blake, Kerouac
 sighing and flying with Naomi
 shedding material odes
 changing tantric clothes
 masturbating with clouds
 winsome and faithful
 snapping the sunflower
 downloading the Buddha. . .

I saw you once with concertina
 in fine, high transport
 squeezing out purple and gold. . .
 I wept then I weep now
 through eyes, cock, and viscera
 a long, sweet caterwaul
 for what you were where you are
 there's your star
 speeding homeward with the comet
 grazing sun, moon, graveyard
 spiralling deep into beaten space
 burning with the lust and light
 of all the life you swallowed. . .

Because

Because we just don't remember
 what it feels like
 not to be yearning,
 having arrived here so . . .

Because we just can't forget
 that death waits
 in the smallest corners
 of the biggest skies,
 change being everything. . .

Because only through pain and loss
 does reverence quicken,
 only when hope departs
 does hope arrive. . .

Because today is Saturday,
 there's soup in the cupboard,
 fat clouds out the window,
 and stretching our fingers
 as far as they'll go,
 we're bound to come up
 against something. . .

Air And Light

"To be uncertain is to be uncomfortable
 but to be certain is ridiculous."

— Chinese proverb

So maybe it's the crock of good gin
 mother retrieves from Belgium,
 and the unabashed, unexpected glee
 of a wake-up shot with coffee —
 or maybe it was those grainy nights
 camped out in the adobe courtyard
 of a downtown church in San Diego,
 wind-up alarm clock set for five —
 because maybe uncertainty
 and its teetering gray motion
 feels truer
 than the fixed board of stars overhead. . .

Words like hermeneutics, exegesis, deconstruction
 leave a bad taste in the mouth —
 better crazy, broke, and desperate,
 blood stitched to the vertebrae of vapor
 dissolving within. . .
 Sometimes good to be bone-tired and raw,
 slapped about by big-shouldered clouds
 nattered at by groups of sparrows
 knocked flat and unknowing
 until the dispensations
 of air and light
 are everything. . .

The Death of Mr. Quimby

Quimby lies abed,
 eyes half-open,
 fixates on one long gray cloud —
 the last cloud
 he'll ever turn to
 through the last window
 he'll ever know. . .
 (The parking lot is full,
 the cars mostly red,
 mostly new. . .)
 He'd wanted to avoid this setting,
 for many years cherished the notion
 of being able to do it
 like an Indian —
 hop on a bus to Maine
 and get off
 in a small town near a forest,
 enter the woods
 and never return. . .
 A weak smile
 on his lips this morning
 when I bring in his oatmeal and juice —
 and I hate this place myself —
 the stainless steel
 the sunken eyes
 the stench of sweat, shit, and piss. . .
 As I lay down his tray
 Quimby points to the window,
 so I look beyond
 his thin yellow finger
 and see a bluejay
 divebombing a crow. . .

He raises up from the pillow,
 turns to me,
 whispers, "How appropriate,"
 drops slowly back down,
 closes his eyes,
 is gone. . .

*Picture Window, Good Acid, or
Jersey Book of the Dead*

(for Dave)

Comes a point where earthly transmissions
vanish,
and you're left with sounds, premonitions,
prehistories. . .
The stucco walls of shoreside motel evaporate,
but the plate-glass wall
between you and the other side
hums clear and bright. . .
And perhaps a flash of ocean
or slip of flesh
momentarily breaks in,
and perhaps you brush it away
like a crumb from a table. . .
Relations enter and recede,
gray-white wisps of stormcloud
blowing back to the sea. . .
Surrender whatever is left of you —
you needn't do anything
but gaze through
that scratched picture window
until all is white and silent. . .

Summer Solstice

Sun,
we could never
have gotten this far
without you,
and you'll be up most the night,
granting but a cup of darkness
to give the birds a breather. . .
Barely four in the morning,
yet sparrows peck and chirp
as we read through our pockets,
our hair,
our dreams —
groom our regrets,
ponder our future,
prepare to stalk avenue and park
for a warmer slant of mercy. . .

Pale, pink bitterroot of dawn
eases in tenuous and sly,
yet gratitude
is the first mark upon us. . .
Too early to open
the ledger
of love and fate,
but we do anyhow,
and the weight of a tear
tips the balance. . .
No warmth
to your fire yet —

you begin chill and introspect,
 the better to gauge
 our own transit. . .
 And is it
 the tops of the mountains
 or tips of our fingers
 that silently glow
 with peace and age?

It's the longest day
 of a quickening life,
 and not one bird, man, or thought
 escapes your broadening rays. . .

Old Man on a Bench

A very old man
 leads a small perky dog
 through sun-ravened alleys,
 walking a horrific,
 beatific past,
 seeking but not seeking,
 running his mouth if you let him —
 but no,
 just a dip into eyes
 blue-filmed, otherworldly,
 lucid and pained in the affecting way
 time inscribes and reveals. . .
 and he approaches the river
 where he sits on his bench
 to chronicle perfect sunlight —
 gold trails
 over black waters
 under azure skies —
 and a cigarette is fished out
 from a crumpled red pack,
 and the first exhalation
 is rest and addiction,
 the second hope and hallucination
 as the dead
 break the water —
 naked, smiling, problematic —
 emblems of connection
 through these later hours
 when time presses sweet and ornery
 and old kisses
 a stairway bound elsewhere. . .

and a third drag
 rolls out
 round and serendipitous,
 a lazy, upsweeping lasso
 that collars some peace,
 excites the dog,
 drifts away large
 and empty. . .

Daybreak in the Shack

Pissing in a juice jar
 and smiling to no one in particular,
 I've jumped out of bed
 for the twelve-millionth time —
 assuming a bodily form
 and tending to its particulars. . .
 Flow of piss
 fills the jar
 warms the hand —
 dreamy clarity
 of an act
 in two worlds. . .

I look out the window
 at big morning sky,
 place still mouth
 over stiller heart,
 name nothing,
 praise everything. . .
 I cap the jar,
 still smiling. . .

Gone in Lawrence

I don't remember just how it began,
 but my brothers and I
 sit shoulder to shoulder
 at the K of C bar in Lawrence,
 kicking around memories
 of father's life and death
 as Catholic drunks left and right
 move in and out
 of football on the big screen,
 bitching and eulogizing freely. . .
 We're doing likewise,
 making sometimes curt,
 sometimes kind pronouncements
 on the nature of his love and rage. . .
 And from father's death
 we jump to the deaths of old neighbors —
 Jessie Jakes, the voyeur next door,
 and her funereal Sunday drives
 in the pink Impala,
 this time off the Central Bridge
 into the sturdy Merrimack,
 where she keeps close tabs
 on the hornpout, eel, and carp
 that morosely scuttle about. . .
 Ralph Blanchette, the Don Juan of topiary,
 bedding down the widows
 Fulbright, Shay, and O'Rourke,

forever clipping those balding hedges,
 shears smacking hard and clean
 until a heart attack
 lays him out in the driveway. . .
 The old roster of the old street
 called out one more time. . .
 But they're all gone,
 all in different neighborhoods now,
 and the certainty and multiplicity of death
 becomes a rich and ludicrous game
 as the names shoot out
 from the backs of our brains,
 as the television and booze become louder. . .
 Fred Elkins — DEAD!
 Eileen LaChance — DEAD!
 Tony Parisi — DEAD!
 We shout the word DEAD
 with mounting exuberance,
 but we're all gone, too —
 four old neighbors,
 four seldom-seen brothers,
 lengthening the ride
 sweetening the demise
 through the comfort of blood
 and kinship of wine. . .
 And this is our father's religion,
 this the sharing we came for —
 Christ the pagan
 setting up the bar

admitting no rest
 not even in dying. . .
 So I take a good look
 at my brothers' faces —
 Al's eyes probe and sparkle like father's
 Pat and Frank have mother's loose chin —
 and I call out their names
 they call out mine
 we jubilantly rehearse
 the future past-tense
 of present day's affection. . .
 Al — DEAD!
 Pat — DEAD!
 Frank — DEAD!
 Ric — DEAD!
 And thank God
 Al tends bar here part-time
 and father taught us to tip well,
 because we all look
 crazy and menacing when drunk,
 and the lit Lawrence Catholics
 at the K of C bar
 take their sports
 and their deaths
 far too grave and personal. . .

Ramble

He sees every mathematical equation
 in the cosmos
 shimmering beneath his closed eyelids. . .
 He becomes perfectly quiet,
 gets verve and sartori,
 gets down with a hooker
 wrapped in fake furs. . .
 He begins —
 “What place do I have in this universe?” . . .

He abandons states linear and staid
 in lieu of helix, sparrow, lily. . .
 He builds new ethics nightly
 from the corner-booth of a skidrow bar,
 alternately addressing others as
 “Your Hieroglyphic Ibis” or
 “Devotion's Warm Housecoat”. . .
 He bores through the litany of comfort
 yet fishes the pier in silk pajamas. . .
 He wants nothing so much
 as to feel nothing so much. . .
 He takes a sprig of Sitka spruce
 and places it on the labia of the barren,
 a shard of emerald beach-glass
 and nails it to a hard hat,
 a molecule of ecstasy
 and breaks and passes it Christ-like. . .

O yes mind
large as language
heart
broad as kinship
and pain bisects and multiplies. . .
In every equation he sees
change is a variable
God a constant
the solution a blank book
filling with words. . .

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