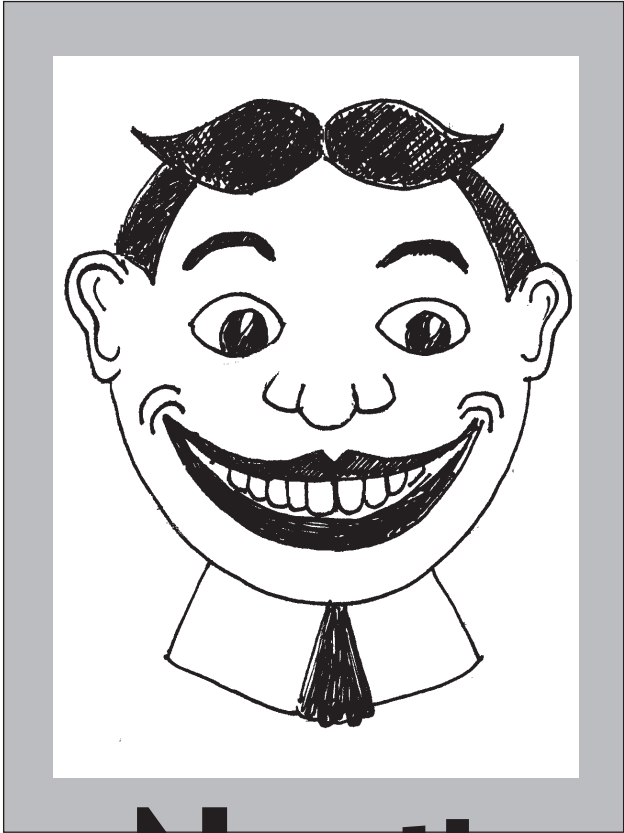


POEMS BY JOE CICCONA



**North
of Jersey**

North of Jersey



RAIBOOKS NUMBER THREE
Ray Soulard, Jr., Series Editor



RAI BOOKS TITLES

ORPHEUS & EURYDICE:
MAKING THE LYRE
Ray Soulard, Jr.
1999

FERRY TALES AND OTHER POEMS
Ric Amante
1999

NORTH OF JERSEY
Joe Ciccone
2000

North of Jersey



POEMS BY
JOE CICCONE



MALDEN, MASSACHUSETTS



SCRIPTOR PRESS

2000

For my family

NORTH OF JERSEY
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On the cover SAVE TILLIE

Contents

Utrillo's Blues	1
Passaic River Revisited (for David and Paul)	5
Rimbaud and the Little Herring.....	7
Asbury Park Carousel.....	13
Three Tramps.....	17
The Classroom	18
The Window	21
Naunny's Song	23
The Story of the Boy Who Goes by the Name of Nonsense	25
Glass Bell.....	32
On Time	33
Prologue	35

i'm still a Stranger in America

**North
of Jersey**

Utrillo's Blues

I

The painting hangs without guile on a wall of windows
Its image rendered as though a part nearly
Inseparable from the that which moves in time
Outside this room
Two scenes living together
In spite of each other
One of them the crowded streets and looping lanes of the park
With its long rows of autumn trees and
Gentle sunlight that always seems to garner a bit more
Warmth than what the season holds
As its burnished glow passes through the glass
To light the other scene framed there

But I gave little thought to its somber theme
After a while it became just another thing to have
With its canvas like a fabric
To match the greens and grays of the room
The muted plaid of the couch
And the glass basin with its carafe and yellow sunflower

I no longer considered at length its bleak vista of rooftops
As I sat below my long shelf of volumes
Immersed in a landscape of Shakespearean railyards
Chasing a hobo's footsteps across trammed paths
That perhaps never existed as I imagined them
Believing I would soon uncover the place where song and life
Broke apart
And I would be the one to sew them together again

Amidst the token Underwood's rollicking cacophony
Like the bells of a trolley
I of course wrote nothing good
But even so the stories I've come here to tell you begin in this
place

Growing out of a receding wellspring of realities
 Each of them existing in a time
 That is perhaps not ours to reckon and echoing what lies
 Beyond this fragile language endlessly coming and
 Going and never really saying anything other than
 We are here right now
 And since the road stretching out before us seems real enough
 Let's travel it together

II

There was a day I recall clearly
 Like any other
 In the city that I told myself over and over
 I just happened upon
 No better than anywhere else
 Anyway I wasn't going to stay for long
 Only until I learned the craft
 But days seem always to lead
 To years
 And soon you forget the reason why you've come
 In the first place
 But you can't forget the same things forever

I walked into the room where the painting hung in stillness
 Appearing at first to be just as I had left it
 After all nothing much happens to paint once it dries
 Aside from what happens to us all
 A slow fading over the years the colors
 More or less always reminding us in the same way
 Of how everything is brighter in Pontoise in summer
 When the spires of the churches are not hazed in such a sullen
 atmosphere
 As Utrillo so often depicts them
 With the bleak lines of a street full of lightless doorways
 And curtained windows
 As if every newness had been stolen away in one deft stroke
 And was no longer worth chasing after

Overcome all at once with this delirium of vanishing certainties
 I could do nothing other than follow it along its course
 Unable to rebuke the new interpretations as they were
 occurring to me
 Because they seemed to recall episodes
 From my own memory
 Winters full of indistinct loves renewed in the form
 Of a singular essence
 A tightness bearing down from outside
 To push me through the shadows of half-lit buildings
 And along the arcade with its naked entrances that were like a
 series of
 Secrets opening into a night full of clouds and
 Lost kites
 Into whose chill air even the bony arms of trees reach out
 And lose their way

III

The street itself seemed calculated in comparison to what
 I then knew was behind it
 Its angled structures devolving into shallow surfaces that
 Rose up from their planes to become the numbers
 The painting had always managed to defy as though the world
 Represented merely a sum to be tallied without labor
 In a meaningless place
 Yet for a brief moment I knew I had somehow gone beyond its
 creation
 Into what was really there in that cold town in France
 Conceiving of a ghost walking without sound among the
 balconies strung
 Together by threads of iron seeing its face for a moment
 Realizing it was me

That I could not even remember the good artist's name is
 Perhaps a mark of the work's success
 It was as if I had rendered those shapes myself
 On the day soon after the flood

In the basement where I once lived
 When I first noticed the picture leaning against a
 Line of dusty barrels and recognized it was somehow dry
 Below the stain marking where the water had come up
 And in a way I quietly shared its ignorance
 So I took it and closed the door behind me
 Setting out into the cold singing over and over the words
I will go find what I do not have
 Telling myself it was to pursue a constant newness through
 language
 Though it was the greatest one of all I was
 Running away from
 And although it can never be fully expressed with a bending
 tongue
 Among the living
 I'm sure it had something to do with love

IV

On that day I would start to become the person who I now am
 Alive for the first time
 With the door still swinging silently on its hinges
 And myself exhaling as I continued to look across the room
 Toward the wall with the windows and the painting
 Each one a viable entryway into different scenes
 No one less real than any of the others
 Yet it's just that I chose the painted one that day
 For my code
 My vision
 And peered down the last alley
 At a single strand of blue I had never before seen
 Toward which the pale city was converging
 A pale electric spark
 The scarf of a woman
 Furtive among the dull shades
 Evading my glance as she hurries between gaslights
 And just like that gone

Nonetheless it must be her who I keep returning here
 Day after day hoping to find

Passaic River Revisited

—for David and Paul

As children we were told to keep away from you
 Even the maps we thieved turned into air
 As we traced your sourceless figure
 Black running
 Across the charted regions

When the floods came we watched from a distance
 As town lines dissolved into one deluge of fear
 And we were unsure of what was
 Rising up to meet us and if we'd be sanctified or
 Condemned by your rank water
 So we kept only to the high bridges
 Passing over your length like fire
 For some reason wondering the whole time
 Who we were

Some time later we grew into the realization that
 Your silent cargo of condoms and cracked bottles of Miller High
 Life
 Was in some way our own reflection
 The slow procession of innumerable shredded tires and
 Like you see in pictures the dead in nameless sacks
 Were all presentiments of our future
 And the stretches of oil floating alongside the bones of our
 mothers
 Was our dark flute our passage
 Unraveling an even darker melody which would become
 Our only truth
 So naturally we stayed away

I would tell you now I have traveled a long way
 And was here while passing through
 But what remains of an accent in my words
 Will tell you I've come home
 Though what is home but a broad corner of everywhere

And for today this town into whose legacy I am constantly
 being reborn
 With no way out
 Its traffic picking up now at rush hour on the pitted road
 Glazed with brown ice

No matter how far I go the story
 Will remain the same
 And so I am no longer embarrassed or afraid
 So what if I cannot go further back than these streets
 And this foul bank of mud
 Where the good river rushes up
 Flows on and never ends

Rimbaud and the Little Herring

By now he had already gone beyond the
 Place where rhymes lead
 And keeping to the road in summer
 He finds Brussels with its cobbled streets and quaintness
 And this dusky little attic strewn
 With rank-smelling pipes and bags of hash
 And on the floor Verlaine's notebooks
 Open and laughable and that wretch himself
 Gone for a bottle of wine
 Good riddance

He'd just as soon drink through summer alone
 In enormous gulps poison after poison
 Every failed system of religion
 Weaving a banner of burning colors that would sear
 Through his eyes into which the visions
 Would return to form newer languages whole
 Dictionaries turning visions into words through impossible
 reasoning
 As though the madness would never come
 To steal back the voice of the infinite

But now he sits like an old man at twenty-one on a
 Stiff-backed chair twitching and looking down at the
 Cobbled streets of Brussels
 Wondering where that fool had gone
 Ah Verlaine who will never know what it's like

To have been deprived of youth
 With ailing siblings their sickness his alone to bear
 As the Germans smothered the countryside
 And mother like a shrinking number
 Mother with her numbness toward everything
 After so much
 All but dead yet still awake and pacing the barn at Roche

With no shoulder to lean on
 No man with whom to recall familiar symphonies
 Recollections shared in sighs
 So that a tune might rise out of this endless season to save
 them all

And so the ribbons are still on the walls
 The prizes the framed portraits of Arthur
 Even after all this
 Vocabulary exams and loving notes bound in leather cases
 As though he would soon return
 To stay for good
 With a woman made of morning glories

And his voice too is still echoing among the boards
I must go now mother
I must go though close to her bosom she keeps
 A saved note a scrap from a sheaf of what must have been
 The first series of Illuminations
 Telling of a young couple strolling through a palm garden as
 King and Queen the irony of the scene something she will
 Never fully understand
 How it was that he came to hunger for a different knowledge
 Following the shadow of love into veiled places
 Believing in its redemptive holiness
 Trusting in his own ignorant youth
 And his friend that scoundrel Verlaine
 Come again to take him away and
 Where can one really go to look for youth
 But further toward heaven
 Or on the road and in winter perhaps Africa
 But for now simply Brussels with its cobbled streets and nausea
 And sewers of music that were for them endless strips of
 ecstasy
 Along which they would walk together night after night
 With senses deranged to the hilt
 And in the chill morning never quite reassembled into more
 Than a mere pulsing wreck of nerves

While his poetry withered inside
 And although the visions were still flowing the words continued
 to expire
 As the limits to each term he'd created were revealed for what
 they were
 Sounds beyond which nothing could exist any longer
 Except as curses furled into these evenings spent sniffing through
 alleys
 Looking for something that could stand up
 Something as beautiful as the flowers in Roche
 Blooming in anonymity

This is all long before London's episode with Verlaine jealous
 again
 Angry pathetic his own wife threatening from the road's
 beginning
 And nearing madness himself when he'd draw a pistol
 Firing it at Arthur who would be wounded but not seriously
 Who would watch his friend go to jail and all his letters left
 unanswered
 Wondering what they were doing to him in there
 And of course it would be Arthur's pleas and depositions that
 would free him
 But then he would take flight alone soon after to spend his
 Obscure years aboard slave ships running guns and sobbing in the
 Dark while his legs fell away
 But for now it's just this miserable expense of an evening
 And Verlaine is still not back yet
 With a hand that trembled as he reached for Arthur's cheek
 And shallow eyes that welled up
 As they met Arthur's so full of venom
 And he just a boy with a baby's face
 Skulking down the boulevard after a debacle at the theater
 With the shouts of *Nigger* and *Fuck all of you*
 Bottles of green spilling over their buttons
 As they were dragged out beaten by the gendarmes and left in the
 street
 Only to crawl home laughing
 And begin again

Arthur sits alone in the stale room
 Under a heap of blankets seeing below him the cobbled streets
 And intermittent walkers and smelling the aroma of bread
 Wafting on a warm breeze
 And amidst the drumming in his head he looks up to see
 They are still there above him
 After all that
 Horse-carts riding swift down the highways of the sky
 And a faint smile comes to his thin lips
 As he realizes that although the pen is dying the worlds will go on
 Each of them
 Stretching like morning over the tops of mountains
 Rising among cities in dreams
 Breathed out like wind by
 Other children deprived of youth and left to flower
 Into their own madness in communes or
 On untracked plains
 Wandering through letters passed between old friends
 Blistering in the wishes of pedantic schoolboys with soiled sheets
 Even without their shapes it is the words that must go on
 Like little drunken boats the words go on

And here he is now Verlaine
 Coming out of the sand of the street
 With not even a bottle of wine after so long
 But just an insipid frown and a herring in one hand
 And in the other a bottle of olive oil
What an asshole Arthur says to himself
 And then he chortles
Don't you look like an asshole with your bottle of oil in one hand
And your herring in the other

Verlaine hears him but does not look up
 He just keeps walking toward the front door
 Mumbling under his breath *He's mad he's mad*
 Pretending to know nothing of this boy in tatters
 Sitting at the window like a phantom
 In the midst of a life so unlike his own
 The young days cozy and devoid of even the notion of

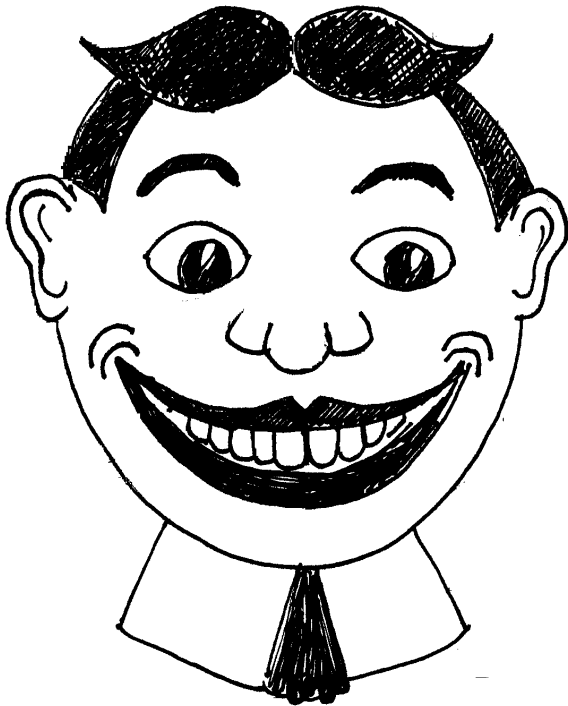
Hiding from summer in blankets built for colder seasons
 Like his friend the sick prophet whom he put here

So who can hope to know what lies below these fragments
 What deliriums what visions
 And so Verlaine retires to the basement
 To cook the little herring
 In one of the brick ovens that burned through the heat of July
 the smoke
 Stinging Arthur's eyes reminding him of a larger fire burning
 below
 Knowing that he must go beyond the fixed end and
 Farther than the day
 As the clouds sailed around his head
 To roam straight through each level of pride
 Even in his mind as he lay bedridden
 The wooden legs he would never use lying beside him
 As he welcomed the first pangs of death in Abyssinia with the
 usual bitterness
 But agonies are all the same after a while
 And only after their passing will come the thin chance to
 witness the alchemy he dreamt of
 Music eternal
 And youth
 Ah youth perhaps then

Asbury Park Carousel

*“Everything dies, baby that’s a fact,
But maybe everything that dies
someday comes back . . .”*

—B. Springsteen



The whirling leaves see nothing alive out of their eye
Except for a heavysset skate-punk girl
Her spiked hair bleached at the ends and even she
High on something it seems
Slides back into the wet haze having found no metaphor in the
Toothless gears and twisted flywheels and having taken
Little interest in the rails bent upward along the slurred epithets
whose

Ignorant vowels drip like grease from these walls
Only to fall unheard to the sandy boards still scattered with
Painted eyelids and stirrups left
From another time

I do not know why I keep finding myself here as I do today
On this winter afternoon with its misplaced heat
Wandering through the shell of the old carousel house
Hoping for a sign that someone has begun at last to see the
plan through
But then I remember there is no plan
Just a longing that keeps repeating in our collective mind
A point we never quite phrase correctly and so seldom say
aloud

Bound only by the silence of
These ruins in which we stand
And those of us with our long years still ahead will now start
singing out
Before it’s too late

As a child I too brought my gold rings to the Palace
Looking for a notion of romance
Something that would last

But what I was given quickly went sour
 And I must carry with me forever this foul prize this bag of
 giggles
 Mocking all that I will ever do
 Until the end
 Either way I must write these lines in the unaffectionate heat
 The weaker of the nightmares having all flown by now
 In the dark
 Toward an open field only they can see
 While above me the wide-eyed face in question fades steadily
 away
 Muttering with gentle menace a solemn refrain
 The last death song of the promenade

But today I will call you by your name Tillie
 Although you've probably forgotten it by now
 Along with everything else whose vivid colors have thinned
 away
 And are now almost invisible to both of us
 So how could I have expected you to remember mine after so
 long
 Nonetheless I return now as a friend
 Hurried by the image of your grin stretching from ear to ear
 Wanting to save you even though your fortune says
 Tomorrow you will be the last to go
 Along with all the others
 To that place beyond meaning

Tillie I came wanting the story today
 And I will not leave until I know precisely how it occurred to
 you
 Watching from above the apocalypse unfolding
 As the pier suddenly rotted out of its shadows
 And the shoreline receded
 The streetlights popped like fireworks
 Windows were blown out from their casements
 Foundations all at once collapsing beneath their structures
 And even the salty air growing unfamiliar and then vanishing
 Taking pieces of you with it

While everyone sat around stoned with the clowns
 To watch the whining engine of the tilt-a-whirl tear loose from its
 housing
 And spin madly along the midway in sparks of neon light
 Coming to rest by a scooter car thrown from its circuitry
 Its headlights closed up in darkness like two dead stars

Tillie perhaps you could not stop the slow flood
 Rising like the children's blood
 As the angels in engineer boots scribbled choruses of blues
 In the jackets of poetry books
 Trying to say old things in a new way
 And the horses of the carousel tore loose from their fastenings
 In an instant
 The brackets falling from their cropped saddles in a broken trail
 across the sky
 And the echo of their ranging gallop like a single stroke of thunder
 Dissolving into unknown regions
 Calm and sure-footed before daybreak

And what about the strange finale when the bands came
 One after another
 As if all this were not enough
 Prophet-madmen seemingly from a different America
 Drumming up the living still left
 Creating hope for a brief moment
 But then ripping up the scene like a carnival ticket
 To head north with their guitars
 And sacred texts

Whose hand dealt the final blow Tillie
 Or was it from our own boredom that our little Eden crumbled

Tillie I have conceived this version of the story
 From the devastation around me
 Always I imagined that a great force must have blown through
 here
 Uprooting in a flash everything worthwhile
 But knowing that what really happened was much less theatrical

And perhaps more gradual but in the end irrelevant
 For blame alone cannot fully explain the decay of a place
 Built from ideas
 Let alone be used as a tool to rebuild it
 And since we'll never remember exactly what home was
 We must begin instead to dream it up again

Beneath my feet the boardwalk creaks under the weight
 Of memory
 But it is no longer ours to bear
 Tillie I think you will go on someplace without me
 And I hope it is so
 Since it is indeed your laughing thread that I'm bound to follow
 Through the illusion of my eyes
 Out over the ocean as far as our last days together will allow

Three Tramps

(Variation on Nikolaus Lenau's "The Three Gypsies")

I once found three tramps,
 Lying inside a tight doorway,
 As my Chevy crawled with weary torment
 Across the cracked street.

One of them, for his own enjoyment, held
 A guitar in his hands,
 And, with the glow of evening gleaming around him, played
 Himself a raucous ditty.

The second, in his lips a bone he'd rolled,
 Was watching his own smoke,
 Merry as if he needed nothing more
 From the world for his happiness.

And the third was sleeping comfortably,
 His harmonica hanging in a rack from his neck.
 A gust of wind swept through his reeds,
 And a dream passed over his heart.

On their clothes the three displayed
 Holes and multicolored patches,
 But, defiant and free, they showed
 Scorn for earthly destinies.

In three ways they showed me
 That when life grows dark,
 How one can strum, smoke, and sleep it away
 And triply conquer it.

I had to look back for a long time yet
 At the tramps as I traveled on,
 At their dark brown faces,
 Their long, briny hair.

The Classroom

You are deep inside the late evening with only the dark walls
 And stillness and for a moment the glow of a passing car
 Revealing a dim alphabet gliding across the top of the
 Ignorant room where you have taught the same way Mother
 For thirty five years

Even while those we loved made their way toward their future
 Of white light and even I went off
 To find my way along each strange highway
 You remained unchanged with the same curly red hair
 And purple-framed glasses that serve only to magnify your eyes
 As impish and knowing as Grandmother's
 Capable of searing through anyone's words

I watch you shuffle a few papers
 Not pausing to take in the moment in feigned reverie
 As that was never your style
There is much too much to do you always say
 And as you hurriedly assemble tomorrow's lessons
 These few indistinct words slide off your tongue
 To dissolve unheard into the echoless air
 Meant more for yourself than anyone

It is another late night without pay to add to the others and
 No one of course takes note
 But you will go on teaching the words of our language
 Getting at whatever truth is still left in its
 Simple phrases and patterns of music but the tiny souls that fill
 The stout rows of desks and round out the hours of your life
 With their innocence are no longer the same as they once were

With their new ways of thinking
 They sometimes appear timid
 When compared to your own memories and
 All the tales that comprise it
 Which you recount only to those you have let into your world

Like when you watched through these windows the tanks
 marching single file
 Down First Street to gather inside the stadium
 While the riots broke out and your father was somewhere in the
 middle of it all
 With his gas mask and helmet and you wondered
 What was going to happen and if home
 Would still be there
 As you dismissed class a few minutes early that day

In high school your own yearbook portrait included the caption
Determined individualist
 And I've never come across anyone with the nerve to disagree
 Even as a young girl teaching through her first year
 In Newark's bullet-crossed streets your heart was full of
 convictions
 From which you never strayed
 And isn't it strange that after so long you are still clothed
 In the threads of a teacher
 And I in those of a student still learning how to live up to all this

For you teaching these children was in some way an attempt to
 understand
 Your own son out of which knowledge you would learn
 something of yourself
 And be assured that yes you have lived
 In the right way yes you
 Have done all you could have hoped to do
 An affirmation that comes I suppose out of patience from within

Mother you may not hear these words as they occur
 Between us in different times
 Their meaning may be revealed to you at a place in the future
 That cold and blowing hallway
 So for now we share only this exchange
 And I must say something beyond supposition
 So let it be that I am walking in some way
 Into your handwriting and that it is our stories I share
 In my own pages

No matter what they seem to be about on the surface
 And in the end their arguments always seem to come down to
 family

So go on just the same tomorrow when this room
 Will be bright with the morning light
 And let your voice rise up again and pass on without lingering
 Like everything else through the cracks in these old walls
 Dancing ever upward among the bright mobiles you've made
 And hung from the otherwise plain ceiling
 And take with you whatever feeling you have now
 As you read this

The Window

Everything is still complete on the other side
 Though the window fell shut
 Sometime in the night
 The sky reflected there is as flat as a door

In the bleak schoolhouse my father without a beard
 Took his pupils to the lectern
 And set out to teach
 Why tomorrow was to be for everyone

It was here he first calculated the day's turning
 It was here the measurements piled up like the dead
 With no answer
 And he wondered how someone can teach what they are
 unsure of

Today he is gone three years

The half-restored sedan waiting in primer in the garage
 Failed to become more than
 A broken echo of all that seemed constant
 In other days
 But its screws were loosening from the day it was new

Everything is always briefer than you'd think

Soon the wreckers will come
 With their engines moaning
 To pause in the snow
 Laughing
 Laughing

They trust what they've been told
 I still hold what we never had in common
 Hope for very long
 Courage with words

A train in the clouds headed west

But neither of us was good at being young anyway
 And it occurs to me now
 It is mainly the heaviness of our hearts
 Toward our own things
 That we must bear alike
 Even in death

The day is made of granite
 What is on the glass is not real
 Today my father's hallways are crumbling
 But our lives were not made for the taking
 They are irreplaceable

All around me the gray pavement is receding
 Soon it will be evening
 I leave trying to remember what I was supposed to do

Naunmy's Song

This is a song for you
 My grandmother
 It does not need to be poetic or conventional in any way
 It does not need to say everything
 And that's alright because I
 Wouldn't know how to do that anyway

As I left today you were sitting high up at the window
 Waving me off into the cold morning like
 So many times before
 The high tension wires sliding behind me on their own way
 To the end of the gray hills where the narrow bridges
 Lift up from their trusses and fly toward New York
 With their silent birds
 Our brothers and sisters

Soon your birthday will arrive once more like an old friend
 Nodding his head and leaving
 But by then I will be someplace far from these squared-off
 roads
 And Liberty Hall with its one stone bearing the names
 Of those called into the fire
 Each of their voices a long time lain silent

I think too of the quiet nighttime and the doe wandering
 through the yard
 Looking back for a moment at her fawn traipsing among the
 pachysandra
 And her such a diligent follower
 Hurrying to catch back up beneath the gliding song of the finch
 Whose face I remember
 And wish I was home

It's a long way back to 1911 when you were born into this
 country
 The boulevard lit up by the hissing glow of a street lamp

At dinner time
 With the butcher slipping between circles of shadow
 To empty into the sewer his iron bucket full of stale goat-brain
 And filling it back up with lard to sell for a nickel
 To last all winter

And then the stories you tell of the lean years
 With your husband in Cuba on business as
 Castro came into power and you waiting
 At home clutching your rosaries and daughter

Today I wrote a suite on my five-string banjo that you bought
 for me
 To compose on
 Even though you know songs leads nowhere beyond
 The place where they are being sung
 Except in the case of Sinatra of course
 And that poets are those who look but never find

I called it *One Time* and thought it had a pretty good melody
 But soon I will have forgotten all the notes

So perhaps a lesson can be learned by how you've come to be
 Who you are
 Never thinking about where things begin or where they end
 Or what particular bend of meaning might
 Lie beneath them
 But just taking the moment you're in and making due with it
 Because the future will happen even without us

The Story of the Boy Who Goes by the Name of Nonsense

I hope you find these phrases adequate
 I would perform my work better but I was not built from
 gears

Outside my third-story window
 A twelve-membered ring of children erect a synagogue from
 shadows
 And tumble inside
 I hear bagpipes playing

All the artists are asleep at their presses

I

After a long legless day beneath the flashing CITGO sign
 The boy with curly brown hair swam most assuredly through the
 Deepest most uneven tides and when the words
 That gave breath to his voyages no longer filled the sails of his
 dreams
 He abandoned all his old ways and turned to burglary
 Petty larceny and amphetamines

He would later realize his vessel was just an illusion hiding in
 the curtains of his room

His friend the clinging poet understood why this was anything
 but funny
 The love of a flower girl went right to his head
 Don't worry about whom since
 They're all one person

What connects such visions is a charged silence
 Deny it all you want but you know when it's there

And I know you know

His first poem was called *The Ballad of the Modeller*

As I recall

It went something like this

*Landscapes: Turn them over.
Most of what's important sticks.*

And mankind had no answer

But he was more consumed at that time with sea monkeys
Cherry bombs
Bang snaps
Inventions for the improvement of golf balls
Dress shoes
And bookends

He was also writing scripts with no storyline
Hallucinating that there were dead men in the compost heap
Toward which he could see his girlfriend
Sweet Guenny
Approaching with a shovel

By exhuming dead tunes from old songbooks
He sought revelations the splendor of which you might expect
At the place where all religions join paths and end
But his phrasing was always a bit off
And when he finished singing only the silence rose up to meet
him

Always looking like he either just woke up
Or had been up for days
He would host his parties with the rest of the eels
Flipping flapjacks in a silver skillet with a tongue-wash of
benzedrine

[You should have known better (we're in the midst of a nugget)
than to get yourself mortised like
planking above these two nervy downbeats, science and art,
with no signposts to point your way]

Then another poem came to him entitled *The Linguist's Heaven
Butchered*

It went as follows as I seem to recall

*Myriad? No! . . .
Spattering.*

And then mankind answered back but he didn't listen
He knew it wasn't his best work

II

Under the lid of the box of meaning is something about a
musician
Caught between language and song
Out of love
He knows that everything is what it is and he refuses at all
costs
To make anything more out of it
Yet still he wants to have made something solid
Before he dies

Ah he would give his entire education for a decent ship worth
even a
Millionth of its weight in roguery
A young man in puppeteer school with the nerve to speak
about God
He once asked me *Do you like the Doors?*
I said *I like myself*
Lit a joint
And turned my back on my last friend

III

With light bulbs for eyes he came home years later
 The sounds of his journey still ringing underfoot
 To find the house had long since forgotten him

It was there that we would raise our stethoscopes to the
 whirling moon
 And diagnose each other as mad
 Swearing we'd make something out of our youth
 But all we made were asses out of ourselves

The elders grew restless in their caskets
 But their lives had been nothing more than a deep march into
 slow graves anyway
 And their words meaningless to us
 After all it is their machines that are taking us over
 It began with the gandy dancers
 And will end with the empty caboose with its box of locks

When I was young and still had bones in my cookies
 I never imagined anyone could need more grass
 Than the small patch outside my front door
 But here's a drowning tip

Open your eyes and find the light

He did
 Even during those gaps in time when he would pick up the
 instrument
 Glistening with each of its fine strings and his
 Fingers were laced
 Together unable to build
 The lowliest of chords and when
 The lines from his pencil seemed to run off into their own
 Drifting spirals
 Unintelligible to everyone including himself and
 The sounds in his mind no longer hearkened back to anything
 known

Or even knowable
 They couldn't be sung with a voice or bent with a reed
 But merely danced for their own sake
 Coming together sometimes
 In Paris
 In the form of a bird
 Which he could never quite catch in its unpredictable flight
 As it trailed off into the hinterlands of his imagination untagged

He was amazed into a language there was no way out of
 The more he wrote the more laughable his arguments became
 But still tin shacks by the tracks held the promise
 Of Diet Sprites and Marlboro Lights and shoveled eggs with
 toast
 And his mind couldn't have been any cleaner before sex
 That wonderful rhyme
 On which all the best ideas go to waste

Since it is after all a long road and easier to settle for ecstasy
 He moved on quietly through the first shadows of the
 apocalypse

I remember all these people without coming any closer to
 understanding them
 They were my friends
 And he was my best

IV

Pete Seeger and
 Henry Ford and minimum wage are complicated enough
 themes

So let me crawl under this dimly lit altar
 And speak of unions
 And salvation

Till we starve

V

And here's my concept of memory
Since you asked

I woke this morning and thought I smelled the wet papier-
mâché
Of a newly molded cast

I was thirteen again with a broken hand

Later I thought I smelled bad hospital food
And again I was dying with my father

VI

Oh what's the use
I pull a single tooth out of a bag of heads and wonder why I
can't write
Anything good tonight

He once said in a one-line poem called *On Telling Time*
The hard part is knowing where to start from

But I remember clearly when I first met him in a campsite at the
Bonfire rally in Vermont
Having not slept all night and lying beneath my truck
He jostled me saying *Friend*
We are saluting the dawn
We've made it from nothing at all
Come let me show you
While the first geese flew over the tapestry woven down
And brought hard to light
With not even a match

VII

Perhaps these notebooks will someday begin to resemble
notebooks
The symbols
Scrawled out inside their pages precise facsimiles of actual
thoughts
If ever such existed
Notions that at one time told of directions yet to be found
Before all the trees were gone

Glass Bell

The path curls upward
 The century
 Falls out of its loop

And the hands of Christ are invisible as always
 Saying *listen*
 As the boats are called ashore

And the boats come home

On Time

The little stopped clock remembers the sound of light
 coming in waves from the north

but you would think those hands had moved along a course
 of our own choosing that the frozen dial
 marked something that could never be taken away
 in our time

until it is made clear by its quiet refusal that the minutes and
 hours
 were all its own
 turning through us even now as the day grows long at the top
 of summer
 while a young fox traverses a trail of late light
 her fiery eyes for a moment

catching my own
 before she plunges into the dark field
 and is gone
 the rustling of the dry husks beneath her paws leading all the
 way out to the end
 of the plowed rows and vanishing too

it is only silence that comes to take her place
 waiting patiently
 for tomorrow
 when a forest will burst into bloom

Prologue

for Alexandra

I return from dreams exhausted in the awful morning,
like a naked fowl stripped of its feathers, bed-nest reeking in
the terrible heat,
to see the same stripped-down walls, and to hear the exposed
hot
water pipe banging like a tire iron on a dirty rim, giving even
more tilt
to the autographed picture of Sinatra, high up and alone on the
cracked plaster,
in his cotton sweater with the long collar coming through,
while the morning train bears down, like a thunderstroke
amidst the haze,
no Holy ramparts towering from its stack, no stack even,
just a choke of gray smoke sliding over the tops of the cars that
sift down the line
like the shoulders of men in chain gangs.

There's no time for shaving in this world I've scratched out,
barely enough for
shitting, and only on a good day a shower, but like Jack Elliott
says
all you need is a toothbrush, some toothpaste, and a guitar, and
since I have
all three I'll use two of them right now and stare deep into the
throne of wisdom,
knowing that my pipe is the only one apart from the Vatican's
that leads
straight to Hell. What I need now noone can give me,
to catch sight of the sun moving between meadows, the moist
lichen ringing underfoot, and myself running there, full of
the love of a woman,
her voice clear and impossible against the speed of sound.

FOOTNOTE IN THE SHAPE OF A REFRAIN

Ramblin' Jack Elliott is a guy with a guitar who goes beyond
 poetry
 in t what's really there in the spot where yr eyes are lookin'
 and the sound yr ears are hearin', and the sweet aroma yr nose
 is smellin'
 and the cool soil yr hands are touchin'.
 He's the hot whisky yr lips are tastin' and smoke yr breathin'.
 He's the stranger
 who owes y nothin' but keeps givin' y everything, who y knew
 was yr friend
 the moment y met him, though as he spoke to y it was like he
 was talkin'
 to someone in back a y, tellin' y the words y wrote were good
 'uns
 and to keep writin'm, but you knew that already, even before
 you went down there
 just to meet'm
 in that shack in the woods, and to hear'm tell how he and
 Woody and Billy Fair drove
 that Model T straight across't the country with only a
 screwdriver, a wrench, and
 a roll a duct tape, and how the lives he's lived keep comin'
 back 'round like the
 drivin' arm of an oceangoing' steamer until it's all one big story
 that everyone lives,
 one that moves forward, and always further away from y, until
 y realize that the
 truth for some people exists only on stage and that yr now
 one of 'em, and so y leave, feelin' bluer than when y came, a
 blue so dark and inky
 its nearly black.



It is a dream of life from which I keep walking, believing I can
 hear
 the mirrors dancing at my heels, telling me it is only them to
 whom I must answer

from deep in the stream of these questioning years, absent both
 of direction and faith.
 Sacred life, why keep evading me, why keep frustrating the
 agendas I
 put forth? Why pass me over for another child? A strange bird
 singing in word-chants,
 I do not know how have I come to inhabit this knuckled form,
 more ragged than it should be at my age, so that I must bear it
 alone

as I do now inside this hard hour, backward toward the death
 of Rimbaud,
 and toward the death of my own father, calling for nothing else
 than a single revelation,
 not merely things remembered, as a child the terrifying smell of
 cheese
 in the cafeteria, or the image of setting up a family of tin
 locomotives in a
 half circle on the yellow carpet to form a crude roundhouse,
 while figures move
 like shades across a smoky screen, my real family, gathering at
 home or on the boardwalk, in cars or on sidewalks, sand
 scattered about our bare feet in trails that lead off into the
 darkness of the unseen Atlantic. I was still in hands of
 talent then,
 but now I find myself on a different course, talent by now
 nothing more to me
 than a merchant barking into the wind.

It is this song that must go out into the early air, even without
 me,
 finding a home in the silence between its syllables, falling from
 the mouths
 of the hopeful and those ignorant to hope alike, the old friend
 come back again
 to find the street the same as he'd left it that morning—bags of
 torn costumes lying
 beside him, sitting in the vestibule, looking out as the winter
 rains begin to fall,

one guitar string broken the same as it was even back then.
 Friend,
 it is I who will take you in tonight, for I can still sing
 somewhere from
 the youth of our hearts. . . I am still naive enough to sing.

And so it is indeed another morning to spend in search of the
 beat-up khaki work-pants
 with the unwound timepiece hanging from the second belt-
 loop, frozen in a laugh,
 its arms lying in state across its frame, a single white eye dialed
 back into its
 silver crown. So far from the game that I cannot recognize the
 faces that now
 streak across its gridded fields, I know that I can never go back
 again, but
 for a while there was total peace, and potato chips after a
 victory.
 And that is all I'll ever know of time.

FOOTNOTE IN THE SHAPE OF A BAD NIGHT
 IN NOVEMBER

Would you please crawl under these curtains? Please, come
 here,
 and crawl under these curtains. That's it, right over here, by the
 drafty window.
 Come, I'll show you how to play the instrument. Right here,
 like this . . . it's
 just that easy. So would you please come over here? That's
 right.
 Under these curtains.



If only I was able to read myself like you, a stranger, does—to
 be equally
 as puzzled. If only I could know how to make you see more
 clearly what I do,
 to hear the voices I hear, and to know why I feel the need to
 make the connections
 I seek to make. Strike hard I was taught, and down the other
 before he's able to
 strike back. Win everything beforehand, and make a show out
 of the battle.

One fleeting voice in particular is so sweet in its moments of
 glowing brilliance,
 with all the delusions it brings to light . . . it was a balmy and
 breezy, a summer night
 in the mill town, and the five of us were walking down the
 steep hill and
 paved-over tracks, past the dead semaphore and the carpet
 factory with its
 black river underneath, making our way as the rain swelled
 toward the Cafe Twilight,
 which was a place we'd heard all sorts of crazy things about,
 until the sky broke wide
 and we hailed a taxi to take us the rest of the way down the
 hill in the rain,

at breakneck speed, leaving Phil behind; "Wait," we shouted,
 "we can't go on

without our friend!" but the driver kept going, driving faster,
 like my father did
 in his Cadillac and in other poems, his green eyes deepening in
 their sockets

like planets out of their systems, but this was no jaunt down
 the turnpike with its secret marshes and sea of gantry cranes,
 this was
 a dream we all shared and out of which there seemed to be no
 escape
 as we barreled through the stop signs of the silent town, hiding
 our eyes,
 until all at once we were could tell by the jostling that we were
 climbing
 a mountain road, steep, rocky, and loose beneath the
 clambering wheels,

and we opened our eyes to find we'd sailed clear above a
 canopy of cloud,
 pine trees flanking us on either side, until the taxi could no
 longer make it up
 the angle of incline which seemed to increase with each inch,
 so our driver,
 with trademark aplomb, ditched the cab in a sandy grotto and
 evaporated.
 We walked the final few steps to the top of the mountain and
 looked out,
 seeing endless hills, virgin, green, and full of sedate people in
 fedoras and shawls
 who bowed to us as we spun down the dewy hill to join them.
 We made our way to a field of cake frosting, smearing a
 message in

blue candy liquid that told of a new movement of New Jersey
 artists
 which was unaccountable, when all of a sudden an old friend
 appeared,

skiing through the deep cake, and then there were restaurants
 and bars and the
 selling of things, and I felt angry at everyone whom I thought
 betrayed me, so I made my way alone, as always, to the
 most neon juke-joint there. The sign tacked over the
 doorframe said Cafe Twilight. The sun went down and I
 woke up. That was last night.

CLOWN'S MOUTH

Yee-hee-hee and
 into the pages of
 driver always knows
 the pattern on your rug
 just have faith and don't
 which is a glove making
 the crude flame wield it
 pages you can only learn
 so much from yourself the masters can take you only so far one day you
 will walk alone and smirk at the basket full of empty irises while all
 four aces are stacked-up in your holes like dominoes and petals
 fall into the void and you pedal off into the red falling light
 you are anesthetized you are paralyzed you realize
 you can never carry your own remains over
 land or through air you're just another
 fool filling your Zippo with
 eternity

I'll smoke my brain
 history and the cab
 where you want to go
 is the map to your trips
 fear the darkness outside
 promises it can't keep take
 above the stone and burn the
 so much from others and only
 you only so far one day you

and playing mah-jongg up and down the lawn with diamonds on your dog and nails in your jaw until the children genuflecting before you with their red rock candy and clean hair bow down and finally forget about Jesus.



My figure in the glass is no longer that of an obsessed athlete, and with no desire to prove anything else to myself or others, I grab Breton and Eluard's *The Immaculate Conception* off the stack beside the door, and on the way out I pass by Steve, a neighborhood street-person, asleep in the hallway, who on the coldest night of winter came screaming up on a scooter he claimed to have bought for a hundred dollars, nosepiece nearly torn off its brackets, spiraling in the new snow, drunk and high. He said he thought we were those poets. We said yes, we *are* those poets. Then he read something he'd written, or at least composed in his head, all knocked-down and rubbery, and we listened to his words, which were largely incoherent and unworthy of romanticizing over, yet it was then that I saw all my arguments on literature evaporate: poetry—the convergence of a maximum of conflicting realities upon a moment of creation—his syrupy rap somehow approximating then destroying this notion. You know what I mean?

SALAMANDER NOT YET IN THE SHAPE OF
A DEVIL'S CROSSBOW

bulb-eyed, lantern-eyed, moon-eyed, walking with or without a cane, smiling or unsmiling, bellicose, drinking coffee before bed while whores walk through your orchard, incapable of answering the phone, you are now alone, or in a group of others exactly like you, smoking on the new front porch, the porch itself smoking, looking out over an unfolding scene of tree and path, the porch in truth not so much a porch as it is a fire escape, you're sitting on a fire escape, which is not really a fire escape but more precisely a lonely windowsill and you're there not with friends but with only your voices, seeing the small park which is actually more like a line of weeds along a tight lane, which is not so much a lane as it is an alleyway, and the green is not chlorophyll-green but the green of a dumpster's sidewalls, vile scent hovering, the reflection of home in your glasses fading steadily backwards into the ticking from your cuckoo clock, roaming in and out yourself, a final soliloquy formulated long ago, bottle of jack in one hand, childhood sketch of a dewitt clinton locomotive in the other, sewer grates floating downstreet atop deep red wine, mattress greased up and ready, suitcase packed full of harmonicas and E strings, by now fully a witness of the evils of money, a bootlegger like your father before you, lost in this lost world, and locked into the repeating circle of the endless drum solo, playing sordid games in the dark, knock-kneed, barely visible, in a country where noone would have the will to fight a war should another war come to pass (for nothing, even that which is illusory, is worth fighting for anymore, anyway), shunt bearing up your bleeding heart, cold-heart, rake-heart, sickle-heart, scythe-heart, no revolution to embrace today, endless critic of nirvana, accused of being caught between promoting life and love and also pursuing your own passions, but knowing in your own mind you're really just smudging the chalk line between heaven and humanity, like any genius, as the bombs explode beneath the floors of Kosovo.



I never thought I would have to chose a life. No, a life would choose me.
And indeed it has. So when someone asks me what I "want to do," do I seem strange when I reply, "I'm doing it now"? This is where I have set my days, my song, which I compose when I feel mixed up, to prove that yes, I am, in fact, alive, and to stay alive long after the one by my side has fallen asleep, while a truck rides through a blur of snowy fields white hills farmhouses telephone wires and haystacks, to the tune of a mouth organ and some gentle finger-picking, somewhere inside of my television's glass, the sound turned down low.

The song itself is culled from scraps of things—scrawled-over receipts, ice cream-stained napkins, insides of shirt-cuffs, one picture of a junk yard and another of an open field with a single tree and below it the aging pickup, its tires burned clear away by the piping sun, leaving its hubs naked and welded to the grass in rust, rocker panel bowed in the middle, drive shaft torn from its belly and left alone to decay along a shallow gully, shaded by a stone wall, and other things like these—to achieve a liquid flow, a melting of vowels and scenes, splaying the insides of ideas onto the walls of what holds them, then turning the whole mess outward on the world.

Cliched in silence and too numb to run I wait to become all that I hate, knowing that in this darkness of my own creation there is an insatiate force that will save me, having no face, no name, and no psalms to its credit, who will come as I will come, approaching me in a similar manner as I do it, questioning the limits of my knowledge, arriving at

suppertime, masqued in the whites of a servant, holding a tray of burning candles, all my secrets, and, consequently, my soul.

Plump guy, books stacked up on desk are Theado's *Understanding Jack Kerouac*, gift from Barbara who drew Tillie for cover of *NOJ*, Artaud's *Van Gogh the Man Suicided by Society*, Brodsky's *So Forth*, recent *Worcester Magazine* with cover story on Chris Merrill, first mentor, telling of how he dodged his way down sniper-alley to teach Dickinson to Balkan children, wind tearing through shot-out classroom windows, catching the story of a people at the point where their art and survival crossed, he's bound now for Iowa, Williams's *Paterson*, Woody's *Bound for Glory*, Merwin's *Travels*, Edmund's *New Trucks: Prices and Reviews*, copy of *Sing Out* magazine, Whitman's first edition, a Robert Frost selection, a Doc Watson record, old issues of *Cenacle*, three anthologies, German, French, and American, MCAT study guide, Ginsberg's *Cosmopolitan Greetings*, empty bottle of beer, guitar capo, Pete Seeger's *How to Play the Five-String Banjo*, Springsteen songbook, Philip Larkin, Dylan Thomas, B. Dylan's *Gaslight Tapes*, Utah Philips and Ani DiFranco, a picture of father in front of '57 Chevy, a penny and two quarters,

and if I hate anyone it's the beautiful ignorants, the just recently gorgeous too cool for school contingent, those that condemn the academy as well as the underground, the thin and chic Newbury-shufflers who always look like they have someplace more important to be, bandanna-wearing late-night jazz band poetry slam imitators without AIDS who try to explain sickness and dying on the gallows-tree with Mercedes parked outside nightclub red alarm light on dashboard

fucking the spin class instructor in secret only when drunk and never in public. You'd never learn to follow my talk anyway,

even if you wanted to, unlike the grizzled fuck-face one-arm drunk palsied old woman who lies in her sack outside Bukowski's Bar on Bolyston Street (the man himself would never have been seen at such a place) while I get drunk inside with four Irishman and two dimwitted blondes and all my hoodlum friends while trying to make the final corrections on Clown's Mouth section of Prologue, manuscript soaked with beer, ordering shots now, work tomorrow, July 3, 2000, fully covered by health insurance, still some money coming in from home, not quite cushionless but close, and one of them tells my friend who is reading aloud my words "it is a dream of life from which I keep walking," to shut up when all Hell instantaneously breaks loose, and I'm glad these guys are on my side, blood shooting from eyelids, girls terrified running out into the night air screaming, cops rushing in, and us sneaking out the back door. And noone's even getting laid.

I've known too much and too little, been too strong and too weak, too fast and too slow. I've obsessed and been obsessed over, been too big and too small, said it good and said it bad, got it right and haven't gotten it at all, tested people's urine and been tested myself, delivered mail late and delivered it on time, gone down and been gone down on, done it prostrate and done it upright, done it high and done it low, a pompous self-characterizing fool I

wont deny it, glorifying his Hell, weakly masochistic, dreaming
 of martyrdom, innately hyperbolic and as sincerely
 melodramatic as a character from *Jungleland*, truck-thief,
 knowing all the current catch phrases, anti-didactic,
 wistfully Kerouacian and
 sometimes even happy in his own mind, was supposed to go to
 Brooklyn College
 to study with Ginsberg but he died, saved a person's life once
 but nearly
 went to jail for killing a cat, I've wandered to the end of
 Vermont to play
 banjo with some guitar folk from S.F. and to

find the quarry burning and myself up all night in the choke-
 hold of my own
 steering wheel, writing what Ray calls terrified poetry, trying
 to destroy Emerson College with it, until the geese finally
 arrived, and the sun, and the drumming picked up
 though it
 never really ended, and Ray was back too, covered in mud and
 still glowing, I
 wandered also along guardrails of rush hour Tobin bridge at
 sunup liquid channel
 of thoughts leaking from my head, creating a personal circuit of
 logic to link points A
 and B, which by then had taken on physical representations—
 Malden MA, home of Scriptor Press, and the giant Citgo sign
 above Fenway Park—
 but that wild bridge won't take me there, and I'm not one for
 jumping, and
 the sense of these situations is simply that I am trying not to
 find the meaning of
 love but rather to find a way to live out my grotesque but
 deeply personal notion of it,

so I stand alone and wave a final goodbye to my good looks,
 new blues in inner-ear,
 harp in hand, wondering what the fuck those early years were
 all about, a confessed idiot,

seeing corrals of bumper cars in the sky, and hearing the yawn
 of an airplane
 chop through them like cloud chime, knowing all these poems
 are worth about as much as a pound and a half of shark
 chum on the open market, but lots more in secret.

FOOTNOTE IN THE SHAPE OF WHAT OLD BLACK
MR. RILEY WITH THE BLACK SUNGLASSES
SINGS IN HIS JAMAICAN ACCENT WHEN HE
COMES TO PICK UP HIS INSULIN SYRINGES

If I had wings like an angel then I'd fly
To you, my butterfly.

And wherever your heart rings,
I'll follow.

And when you go to sleep, my love, and dream,
you will dream of me.



Route 22 in Jersey, now that's a good road.
No cops, lotsa turns, you can really let it roll if you
need to make up time, or test some new treads,
or race a buddy.

Go ahead friend, set your mind on fire again,
we aren't that far from Dylan.

There was once a guy, the story goes,
who could have been great.
All he had to do was grow some edges, dig deeper
into the dark wells of his mind,
and realize the truth of how the trip ends,
and that it's all a lie.

One day he escaped down through the orchard,
making turn after turn into the mirrored rows,
until he could see no end to them, and for a moment
it was like he was nowhere,
or very far from where he thought he was.
That was, at last, the last we saw of him.

To search for gilded despair, to localize the criterion for
mourning,
and to have it emblazoned onto epaulettes to be worn into
mock battles.

That's one way to fool yourself. To simply live with yourself in a
small van on a little plot on House Street with a dish of soggy
chestnuts

on your table for years, that's another. Just as good.

Either way, the sky will fall whenever you want it to.

I suggest you learn a trade. Then at least you'll have something
on

which to write with some authority.

FOOTNOTE IN THE SHAPE OF WHAT THE NEWS-
WATCHER THINKS

"I watch the small aircraft gently take flight,
rising above a canopy of clouds, toward his homeland.
To me the boy is myself as a boy,
sad-eyed, returning home from his one trip to Disneyland.

Tonight, my porcelain heart breaks for you, Elian,
for I have watched your struggles on the television,
and I don't think it's fair.

On the windowsill above my sink I count three glass beetles.
Three, though I could have sworn there was four.
But this is all I'm capable of, to miss things I never had."



Here's another vignette, this time in present tense:
"How many women did you sleep with?" I ask him.
"None," he replies, "but lots of girls."
Frank was always into sarcasm, and lives in the kind of house
you see
from the windows of trains.

The morning brings the sweetest wind, and gentle.
He kisses his boy as he goes off to play among the freight
yards.
"Don't get your foot caught in any couplers now," he calls after
him.
He and I have stayed up well into the shank of the evening,
teaching each other riffs we'd learned, eating leftover baked
ham,
and creamed corn, drinking Jim Beam, and too soon it's time
to say
goodbye. I say, "You always know just how to put things."
He says, "Yeah, but sometimes I don't know where."

His child is beautiful, named Jim Jr., though I never knew
anyone called
Jim Sr. except Mr. Beam. "What good is a song,"
I ask as I leave, "if all it is for is to make you cry?"
"What good is a mountain," he replies, "if all it is for is to
climb?"

As I walk away I hear a door slam at the end of the highway.
I'll take no advice for you, you road-side skull-capped brat,
for I've heard the real singer and I will not sink to your false
tune.

Her words told of faerylands yet in reach, and her voice was
the door,
so I will not come down for you in stormy weather, even with
the snow thick as a curtain of wool outside. This I promise.

FOOTNOTE IN THE SHAPE OF A LETTER TO A PRIEST

Dear Monsignor Darcy,
 I'm sorry for all my sins, and that you're dead.
 Since last we spoke I've memorized twelve John McEnroe
 matches
 and earned a varsity letter as a college football player.
 Noone frees your mind like John McEnroe, Monsignor.

I like to watch McEnroe while tweaked,
 with *Highway 61* playing in the background.
 It's too bad you will never be able to try that, Monsignor,
 cause it's sure one helluva ride!

I've also been chewing tobacco lately. I have no problem with
 giving up my lip, if it were only for a good cause.
 I must stop this immediately, I know.

Well that's it for now, Monsignor.
 Again, I'm sorry for all my sins. And that you're dead.



My grandmother told me, as she mounted the evening stairs
 like
 Sir Edmund Hillary because of her failing knees,
 that she once had a chauffeur take her to apply for a job she
 already had.
 This was in 1926. My parents took me to Fort McHenry where
The Star Spangled Banner was written. That was 1986 when I
 still thought
 the first two words of the Declaration of Independence were
 "Wealthy people," which is what it looks like and ends up
 meaning anyway. I told them I never liked that song much,
 nor F. S. Key, nor Maryland even. I just wanted to ride the big
 train
 through the mountains, like on the TV,
 but they said the train was closed. With all the rationing

it was unusual to have been able to buy a new car during the
 depression,
 but my grandmother's family did. So then what, I ask, is the
 nobler course,
 to fight for yourself or for others?

The bridges can't be far. I will hide out in the ends of your
 eyelashes
 until we arrive, for deep down I know everything already.
 I feel us falling, and falling now into lucent colors we've never
 imagined,
 wondering what all those lights are about, and why it was
 inappropriate
 to read *Naked Lunch* to third-graders, and why the church
 always made me think
 that life is nothing more than a waiting game, and why the
 crazy guy
 in the coffee shop smiled as he asked for cheddar-cheese
 cappuccino,
 and why his friend on the street laughed as he asked me if I
 had any spare pizza.
 Sometimes I forget that I have an audience who is not me.

Is this rank distillate of life the best we can expect?
 It felt like the inside of a microscope, that school, until one
 night
 in Vermont as he watched the toilet slowly going in and out of
 focus,
 it came to him, the swirling lines of prose that he would
 become known for.
 The critic should be charged with the responsibility of finding
 one artist like him
 for every one he destroys. No rights without duty.

FOOTNOTE IN PRAISE OF FOLLY WHILE THE
FIREWORKS GO OFF OUTSIDE

I watch the lights go out all through the city.
I watch your eyes turn blue and disappear.
I thank you for the use of your guilt,
and your guitar,

but I am sorry to report that the creation of evil
has not gone according to plan.
There was one gentleman in that tight room
that refused to accede to our argument,
which I still think is valid.

I will accept my punishment, sir, like a man,
and apologize that evil will not be the sole way of the world.

—It would continue like this forever.



Youth is subjective for all but the dying,
an angel swinging down low, bringing sweet relief,
proving what is not true, that there is only a moment
and that is who we are:

Nail serpents to the wall, do the Georgia crawl, act in one-act
plays, cherish your own off-key flourishes, and think you're so
young and
wise as long as I did, and eventually you'll have problems too.
Like me, you will catch yourself trying to remember things you
never knew,
"Well if I can't be great than I don't want any part of it," you'll
say,
"I can find notions of love well enough by myself, just from
sounds left in the air,"
whatever that means. But what we are not blessed with is what
makes us great.

You'll soon get paranoid, keep razor blades in your bathrobe,
say you've gained weight
for a poem you're about to write, attend a speech and accuse
the podium of not
keeping its promises, search for an "echo change," try to exist
in
more than four dimensions at once, obsess about the fragility of
our machines
and our dependence on them, keep an unloaded pistol over
your mantel, with one
in the chamber, tell your peers that all the good linear stories
have already been told,
then hold a press conference, drive up to it on a new Triumph
and announce you've
decided to donate your body to science, see the same horrible
black locomotive
in your nightmares each night, a ghost train running through
the fog, blowing its
heedless whistle, with a headlamp as fat and social as the
moon, or Jackie Gleason,
but one that always shines over your shoulder and never right
at you.

You'll wonder about the spiritual significance of ice in the
prehistoric age,
write songs about living on the "needle's eye," be called weird
behind
your back, become introverted for four years, and then break
out again, louder
than before, you'll take the bus to New York City to see old
blind bluesmen
and take notes on their playing, you'll ingest anything that will
push your mind
into new terrain, you'll criticize all your healthy friends who
still operate
with a net, you'll no longer hang mistletoe above your door at
Christmas,
only fear will hang, like a memory, in the back of your mind.

You'll build pyramids of adjectives, tip your hat to one side,
 praise the stars,
 take each subway on the map that looks like a tangle of yarn
 just to say
 you did it, laugh at entropy's swanky sister, develop a taste for
 sour blood,
 weave flames of gold into your hair and a single red rose, drink
 absinthe
 in a café in France while wearing a symbolic blue scarf,
 remember grade-school
 vaguely, as though it existed at the end of a dream, think of
 your time in college
 as if it were a shot of whiskey when the sun was still up in
 your life, watch new visions
 sit up on their own clouds for a moment and then vanish, see
 that you are now
 being imitated by others and get so drunk the wire from the
 electric fan
 shoots straight through the middle of your whiskey bottle, and
 say that life to you
 comes down to nothing more than picking your way through
 the mess.
 You'll give up for a while. Then you'll realize you suck at
 everything else,
 and start again, only this time more patiently.

FOOTNOTE IN THE SHAPE OF AN
 INVERTED DIALOGUE

Bathroom 4:00 AM:
 "Don't believe me?"
 "No, don't believe him!" the voice calls back
 from inside the mirror.

Some folks struggle to bring down the old signposts.
 Others struggle to raise them back again.
 Still others offer to bear them away. But all of us,
 all of us are just barely alive.



Guts is one thing, confidence another. Confidence requires
 proof,
 guts requires merely the act itself, win or lose. If you
 screw up long enough, then at least you can write a poem
 about screwing up, and hey,
 there's one. Guts'll get you that far I think.

Summer doesn't come around simply when wishes are made,
 and people usually ask me if I took lessons before they hear me
 play.

"It's a grind, I'll admit, but one far above the plastic evolution
 of which we've become accepting nowadays, don't you think?"

I asked the
 hitchhiker as we rode. "You just asked me that question like

five miles ago," he said. Perhaps this is not an area of concern
 for most.

No matter how expensive the clock, time just doesn't exist.
 Even so, I'm sure he couldn't wait to get out of my truck. He
 said

he was in a band called Bowie Doesn't Suck and they were
 playing in Boulder.

I wished him good luck, taught him how to play "San Francisco
 Bay Blues"

as best I could, and sent him on his way. I didn't like him very
 much.



And so I make my way to work now, at the end of yet another
beginning,
new ideas taking root somewhere inside me. I'm reminded of
the time
when I played two songs for you; one, full of loops and slides
of words,
tricks of shadows and downbeat, the other full of simplicity
and truth.
You said you like the first one better. You would, I guess.
As for me, I can never decide. Sometimes the house in my
forest has no door.
Sometimes I feel like one of those princes painted on the wall
of a cave,
so flat and set into place, so locked into one direction.
The fireworks are over, it's now just another July in limbo,
and since you've asked me to comment on art and love. . .

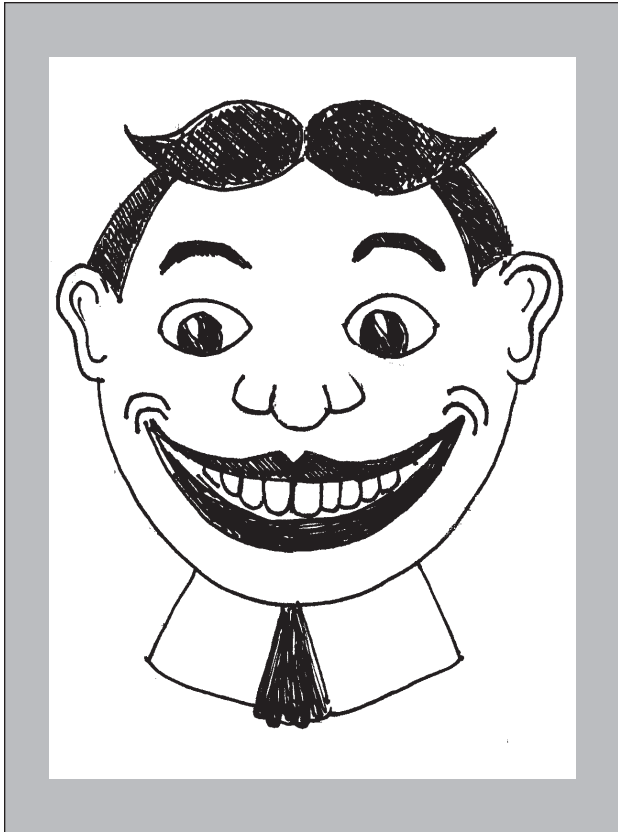
Creating art is like throwing a sheet with two holes over the
Holy Ghost
and asking it to attend a masquerade with you.

And love, love is whatever we don't have. It's a cold beer
when all the bars are shut after a day of hard travelling,
it's the thunder when only silence follows the lightning,
it's the one parishioner when inspiring sermons are
mumbled in the silence of the rectory, it's a letter to a mother
from her son when an officer dressed in mourning stands at
her door.
And it's your hand as I walk alone through the sadness of this
holy street.

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