1

Another Reason Why I Don’t Keep a Gun in the House

The neighbors’ dog will not stop barking.
He is barking the same high, rhythmic bark
that he barks every time they leave the house.
They must switch him on on their way out.

The neighbors’ dog will not stop barking.
I close all the windows in the house
and put on a Beethoven symphony full blast
but I can still hear him muffled under the music,
barking, barking, barking,
and now I can see him sitting in the orchestra,
his head raised confidently as if Beethoven
had included a part for barking dog.

When the record finally ends he is still barking,
sitting there in the oboe section barking,
his eyes fixed on the conductor who is
entertaining him with his baton

while the other musicians listen in respectful
silence to the famous barking dog solo,
that endless coda that first established
Beethoven as an innovative genius.

2

The Rival Poet

The column of your book titles,
always introducing your latest one,
looms over me like Roman architecture.

It is longer than the name
of an Italian countess, longer
than this poem will probably be.

Etched on the head of a pin,
my own production would leave room for
The Lord’s Prayer and many dancing angels.
No matter.

In my revenge daydream I am the one
poised on the marble staircase
high above the crowded ballroom.
A retainer in livery announces me
and the Contessa Maria Teresa Isabella
Veronica Multalire Eleganza de Bella Ferrari.

You are the one below
fidgeting in your rented tux
with some local Cindy hanging all over you.

3

Earthling

You have probably come across
those scales in planetariums
that tell you how much you
would weigh on other planets.

You have noticed the fat ones
lingering on the Mars scale
and the emaciated slowing
up the line for Neptune.

As a creature of average weight,
I fail to see the attraction.

Imagine squatting in the wasteland
of Pluto, all five tons of you,
or wandering around Mercury
wondering what to do next with your ounce.

How much better to step onto
the simple bathroom scale,
a happy earthling feeling
the familiar ropes of gravity,

157 pounds standing soaking wet
a respectful distance from the sun.

4

Introduction to Poetry

I ask them to take a poem
and hold it up to the light
like a color slide

or press an ear against its hive.

I say drop a mouse into a poem
and watch him probe his way out,
or walk inside the poem’s room
and feel the walls for a light switch.

I want them to water ski
across the surface of a poem
waving at the author’s name on the shore.

But all they want to do
is tie the poem to a chair with rope
and torture a confession out of it.

They begin beating it with a hose
to find out what it really means.
5

American Sonnet

We do not speak like Petrarch or wear a hat like Spenser
and it is not fourteen lines
like furrows in a small, carefully plowed field
but the picture postcard, a poem on vacation,
that forces us to sing our songs in little rooms
or pour our sentiments into measuring cups.

We write on the back of a waterfall or lake,
adding to the view a caption as conventional
as an Elizabethan woman’s heliocentric eyes.

We locate an adjective for the weather.
We announce that we are having a wonderful time.
We express the wish that you were here
and hide the wish that we were where you are,
walking back from the mailbox, your head lowered
as you read and turn the thin message in your hands.

A slice of this place, a length of white beach,
a piazza or carved spires of a cathedral
will pierce the familiar place where you remain,
and you will toss on the table this reversible display:
a few square inches of where we have strayed
and a compression of what we feel.

6

Forgetfulness

The name of the author is the first to go
followed obediently by the title, the plot,
the heartbreaking conclusion, the entire novel
which suddenly becomes one you have never read,
ever even heard of,
as if, one by one, the memories you used to harbor
decided to retire to the southern hemisphere of the brain,
to a little fishing village where there are no phones.

Long ago you kissed the names of the nine Muses goodbye
and watched the quadratic equation pack its bag,
and even now as you memorize the order of the planets,
something else is slipping away, a state flower perhaps,
the address of an uncle, the capital of Paraguay.

Whatever it is you are struggling to remember
it is not poised on the tip of your tongue,
not even lurking in some obscure corner of your spleen.

It has floated away down a dark mythological river
whose name begins with an L as far as you can recall,
well on your own way to oblivion where you will join those
who have even forgotten how to swim and how to ride a
bicycle.

No wonder you rise in the middle of the night
to look up the date of a famous battle in a book on war.
No wonder the moon in the window seems to have drifted
out of a love poem that you used to know by heart.

7

The History Teacher

Trying to protect his students’ innocence
he told them the Ice Age was really just
the Chilly Age, a period of a million years
when everyone had to wear sweaters.

And the Stone Age became the Gravel Age,
named after the long driveways of the time.

The Spanish Inquisition was nothing more
than an outbreak of questions such as
“How far is it from here to Madrid?”
“What do you call the matador’s hat?”

The War of the Roses took place in a garden,
and the Enola Gay dropped one tiny atom
on Japan.

The children would leave his classroom
for the playground to torment the weak
and the smart,
mussing up their hair and breaking their glasses,

while he gathered up his notes and walked home
past flower beds and white picket fences,
wondering if they would believe that soldiers
in the Boer War told long, rambling stories
designed to make the enemy nod off.

8

Consolation

How agreeable it is not to be touring Italy this summer,
wandering her cities and ascending her torrid hill towns.
How much better to cruise these local, familiar streets,
fully grasping the meaning of every road sign and billboard
and all the sudden hand gestures of my compatriots.

There are no abbeys here, no crumbling frescoes or famous
domes and there is no need to memorize a succession
of kings or tour the dripping corners of a dungeon.
No need to stand around a sarcophagus, see Napoleon’s
little bed on Elba, or view the bones of a saint under glass.

How much better to command the simple precinct of home
than be dwarfed by pillar, arch, and basilica.
Why hide my head in phrase books and wrinkled maps?
Why feed scenery into a hungry, one-eyed camera eager to eat the world one monument at a time?

Instead of slouching in a café ignorant of the word for ice, I will head down to the coffee shop and the waitress known as Dot. I will slide into the flow of the morning paper, all language barriers down, rivers of idiom running freely, eggs over easy all the way.

And after breakfast, I will not have to find someone willing to photograph me with my arm around the owner. I will not puzzle over the bill or record in a journal what I had to eat and how the sun came in the window. It is enough to climb back into the car as if it were the great car of English itself and sounding my loud vernacular horn, speed off down a road that will never lead to Rome, not even Bologna.

9
Osso Buco

I love the sound of the bone against the plate and the fortress-like look of it lying before me in a moat of risotto, the meat soft as the leg of an angel who has lived a purely airborne existence. And best of all, the secret marrow, the invaded privacy of the animal prized out with a knife and swallowed down with cold, exhilarating wine.

I am swaying now in the hour after dinner, a citizen tilted back on his chair, a creature with a full stomach—something you don’t hear much about in poetry, that sanctuary of hunger and deprivation. You know: the driving rain, the boots by the door, small birds searching for berries in winter.

But tonight, the lion of contentment has placed a warm, heavy paw on my chest, and I can only close my eyes and listen to the drums of woe throbbing in the distance and the sound of my wife’s laughter on the telephone in the next room, the woman who cooked the savory osso buco, who pointed to show the butcher the ones she wanted. She who talks to her faraway friend while I linger here at the table with a hot, companionable cup of tea, feeling like one of the friendly natives, a reliable guide, maybe even the chief’s favorite son.

Somewhere, a man is crawling up a rocky hillside on bleeding knees and palms, an Irish penitent carrying the stone of the world in his stomach; and elsewhere people of all nations stare at one another across a long, empty table.

Bu here, the candles give off their warm glow, the same light that Shakespeare and Izaak Walton wrote by, only now it plays on the blue plates, the crumpled napkins, the crossed knife and fork.

In a while, one of us will go up to bed and the other one will follow. Then we will slip below the surface of the night into miles of water, drifting down and down to the dark, soundless bottom until the weight of dreams pulls us lower still, below the shale and layered rock, beneath the strata of hunger and pleasure, into the broken bones of the earth itself, into the marrow of the only place we know.

10
I Chop Some Parsley While Listening to Art Blakey’s Version of “Three Blind Mice”

And I start wondering how they came to be blind. If it was congenital, they could be brothers and sisters, and I think of the poor mother brooding over her sightless young triplets.

Or was it a common accident, all three caught in a searing explosion, a firework perhaps? If not, if each came to his or her blindness separately, how did they ever manage to find one another? Would it not be difficult for a blind mouse to locate even one fellow mouse with vision let alone two other blind ones?

And how, in their tiny darkness, could they possibly have run after a farmer’s wife or anyone else’s wife for that matter? Not to mention why.

Just so she could cut off their tails with a carving knife, is the cynic’s answer, but the thought of them without eyes and now without tails to trail through the moist grass or slip around the corner of a baseboard has the cynic who always lounges within me up off his couch and at the window trying to hide the rising softness that he feels.

By now I am on to dicing an onion which might account for the wet stinging in my own eyes, though Freddie Hubbard’s mournful trumpet on “Blue Moon,” which happens to be the next cut, cannot be said to be making matters any better.
Marginalia

Sometimes the notes are ferocious, skirmishes against the author raging along the borders of every page in tiny black script. If I could just get my hands on you, Kierkegaard, or Conor Cruise O’Brien, they seem to say, I would bolt the door and beat some logic into your head.

Other comments are more offhand, dismissive—“Nonsense.” “Please!” “HA!”—that kind of thing.

I remember once looking up from my reading, my thumb as a bookmark, trying to imagine what the person must look like who wrote “Don’t be a ninny” alongside a paragraph in The Life of Emily Dickinson.

Students are more modest needing to leave only their splayed footprints along the shore of the page. One scrawls “Metaphor” next to a stanza of Eliot’s. Another notes the presence of “Irony” fifty times outside the paragraphs of A Modest Proposal.

Or they are fans who cheer from the empty bleachers, hands cupped around their mouths.

“Absolutely,” they shout to Duns Scotus and James Baldwin.

“Yes.” “Bull’s-eye.” “My man!”

Check marks, asterisks, and exclamation points rain down along the sidelines.

And if you have managed to graduate from college without ever having written “Man vs. Nature” in a margin, perhaps now is the time to take one step forward.

We have all seized the white perimeter as our own and reached for a pen if only to show we did not just laze in an armchair turning pages; we pressed a thought into the wayside, planted an impression along the verge.

Even Irish monks in their cold scriptoria jotted along the borders of the Gospels brief asides about the pains of copying, a bird singing near the window, or the sunlight that illuminated their page—anonymous men catching a ride into the future on a vessel more lasting than themselves.

And you have not read Joshua Reynolds, they say, until you have read him enwreathed with Blake’s furious scribbling.

Yet the one I think of most often, the one that dangles from me like a locket, was written in the copy of Catcher in the Rye I borrowed from the local library one slow, hot summer. I was just beginning high school then, reading books on a davenport in my parents’ living room, and I cannot tell you how vastly my loneliness was deepened, how poignant and amplified the world before me seemed, when I found on one page


a few greasy looking smears
and next to them, written in soft pencil—by a beautiful girl, I could tell, whom I would never meet—

“Pardon the egg salad stains, but I’m in love.”

Lines Composed Over Three Thousand Miles from Tintern Abbey

I was here before, a long time ago, and now I am here again is an observation that occurs in poetry as frequently as rain occurs in life.

The fellow may be gazing over an English landscape, hillsides dotted with sheep, a row of tall trees topping the downs, or he could be moping through the shadows of a dark Bavarian forest, a wedge of cheese and a volume of fairy tales tucked into his rucksack.

But the feeling is always the same. It was better the first time. This time is not nearly as good. I’m not feeling as chipper as I did back then.

Something is always missing—swans, a glint on the surface of a lake, some minor but essential touch. Or the quality of things has diminished.

The sky was a deeper, more dimensional blue, clouds were more cathedral-like, and water rushed over rock with greater effervescence.

From our chairs we have watched the poor author in his waistcoat as he recalls the dizzying icebergs of childhood and mills around in a field of weeds.
We have heard the poets long dead
declaim their dying
from a promontory, a riverbank,
next to a haycock, within a copse.

We have listened to their dismay,
the kind that issues from poems
the way water issues forth from hoses,
the way the match always gives its little speech on fire.

And when we put down the book at last,
lean back, close our eyes,
stinging with print,
and slip in the bookmark of sleep,

we will be schooled enough to know
that when we wake up
a little before dinner
things will not be nearly as good as they once were.

Something will be missing
from this long, coffin-shaped room,
the walls and windows now
only two different shades of gray,

the glossy gardenia drooping
in its chipped terra-cotta pot.
And on the floor, shoes, socks,
the browning core of an apple.

Nothing will be as it was
a few hours ago, back in the glorious past
before our naps, back in that Golden Age
that drew to a close sometime shortly after lunch.

13
Sonnet

All we need is fourteen lines, well, thirteen now,
and after this one just a dozen
to launch a little ship on love’s storm-tossed seas,
then only ten more left like rows of beans.
How easily it goes unless you get Elizabethan
and insist the iambic bongos must be played
and rhymes positioned at the ends of lines,
one for every station of the cross.
But hang on here while we make the turn
into the final six where all will be resolved,
where longing and heartache will find an end,
where Laura will tell Petrarch to put down his pen,
take off those crazy medieval tights,
blow out the lights, and come at last to bed.