

100 Bad Poems



RAPHAEL MATTO

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ALSO BY RAPHAEL MATTO

God and Other Monsters
Mars

100 Bad Poems

Portsmouth, New Hampshire

DESIGNED AND PRODUCED BY RAPHAEL MATTO LTD



TYPESET IN WHITMAN

When Kent Lew created Whitman in 2002 he was inspired by classic 20th-century text faces like Caledonia, Electra, and Joanna. “I think of the typeface as having an essentially American quality. I hesitate to bring that up nowadays, because of our society’s current nationalistic fervor.”

ELECTRA LT STD

Designed in 1935 by William Addison Dwiggins, Electra is a standard book typeface. “If you don’t get your type warm it will be just a smooth, commonplace, third-rate piece of good machine technique, no use at all for setting down warm human ideas, just a box full of rivets.”

AND JOANNA MT STD

Joanna was designed by Eric Gill in 1930-1931, based on type originally cut by Robert Granjon (1513–1589). Gill created the typeface for his printing firm Hague & Gill—which he formed to give his idle son-in-law an occupation—and named the typeface after his daughter.

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Contents

WAR.....	1
A COLD FEELING	2
DUST	3
THE DEAD DANCE.....	4
APPLE, BANANA.....	6
ONE WAY LOUISE	7
THE CHANGING SANDWICH.....	8
THE FREEWAY.....	9
SHE PLAYS PIANO	10
CAVE GOD	11
JUICEBOX FROG	12
BRONTOSAURUS.....	13
LESSONS	14
THE GOD OF PICNICS	15
PICNIC.....	16
MEANING.....	17
LOVE POEM FOR A.....	18
SHE PRETENDS HERSELF	19
LOVE POEM FOR A, II.....	20
TO MY SCULPTURE: A PYGMALION POEM.....	21
TOO HEAVY TO LIVE IN CLOUDS.....	22
I WROTE THIS POEM BEFORE I ASKED HER OUT	23
I BOILED AN EGG IN YOUR ABSENCE	24

WHITE FLAG.....	25
BLUE, CRUEL LIPS	26
FRIENDS	27
THE NEW BOY.....	29
A LETTER I WROTE YOU IN A DREAM.....	30
A LITTLE PISSED	31
BALLROOM BARBIE AND THE CLIFFS OF MOHOR....	33
ENNIS	35
WISHING FOR THE TIRED	36
TO ISABELLA: YOU CAN BORROW MY SCISSORS	37
I DAYDREAM WHEN KISSING.....	38
MARY POPPINS IN OZ	39
A DAUGHTER'S DEATH.....	40
WHEN THE RAIN COMES	41
I SAW A BUTTERFLY.....	42
KEYHOLE.....	43
POEM FOR KELLY.....	44
THE MILL, THE MAN.....	45
THE SWIFTLY MOVING COW.....	47
SAND BRAIN.....	49
DUSK	50
WATER CALMER.....	51
A DINER PARTY, AND THE BACKYARD	52
GUNSHOTS AND APPLES.....	54
SOMETHING TINY	55
VAMPIRES, WEREWOLVES, ZOMBIES.....	57
SUBTLE	58
HOMESICK	59

ILLEGAL ENTRY	61
THY LIPS ARE WARM: JULIET THE NECROPHELIAC . . .	63
WAR WED	64
JIM MET THIS GOD AT A PARTY	66
HIGHWAY FIREFLY	68
OUR ROBOT LARRY	69
DOWN THE STREET	70
JOE AND SALLY WERE GOING STEADY WHEN	71
THE STUPID SHEEP	72
GOD IS THE SIZE OF A COW	73
MY FATHER'S HANDS	74
ISLAND	76
LION	78
LITTLE BIRDS	79
A PLEDGE	80
SHE HATED THE DOG	81
MY FATHER'S DREAM	82
WEEDING IN THE GARDEN OF EDEN	84
A TRAITOR	86
BREAKING UP	87
LONELY GIRL	88
MOUTH LIGHT	90
MASHED SQUIRREL HEARTS	91
DOG	92
NOW THAT DOWN IS UP	93
SUMMER HELP	94
TO YOUR	95
BREAKTHROUGH	96

BILL AND MABEL BUY SMART-PHONES	97
PAYDAY	98
BEEMER.	99
HOT MOUTH: AN INTERSECTION	101
HIS HEART	102
SLEEPING	104
POHNPEI	105
STONE FAMILY	107
SLEEP.	108
THE ROBOT WHO PRAYED	109
THE EXTINCT ANIMALS	112
EVOLVE-U	111
TO YOUR ELEPHANT	113
BILL & MABEL, AND THE PANIC OF 1873	114
VASE.	116
GOD'S ROCK	117
WAIT	119
SURF	120
SAND CASTLE	121
DAWN.	122
THE DOG WHO SAW COLOR	123
THERE WAS ALWAYS TIME	124
MR. NICE GUY.	126

A NOTE TO THE READER

*All promotion for this book is by word-of-mouth—so if you like it
please promote it on your social networks and ... email me!*

raphaelmatto@gmail.com

*I'd love to hear what you think, especially if you have revision suggestions for
either this book's content or design. You can also follow me on Twitter at:*

@RaphaelMatto

... for news about "100 Bad Poems" and future book announcements.

Thanks!

For nobody

100

BAD

POEMS

You have to write at least 100 bad poems—to get a good one.

~ *Lowlife proverb*

War

HER EYES ARE dry round bones
she takes out to tap the table with:
Grandma. And Rachel comes running
in her fine fiery dress, run Rachel,

run Rachel, young, your fine dress flowing,
find fast the soundless light-drained pitch,

find fast the corkscrew, the plug,
we can't have Grandma hungry, the way she points.

Like the tablecloth is a shroud,
like the table is a body cut open by eating:

the fork and knife operating carefully—
and our teeth sew it together with the heart beating,

how we laugh and sew and sing together,
and by eating we're tugging at war (she points),

until the television starts scraping across the floor,
dragging its eye at our eyes.

~ August, 2008

A cold feeling

MY LEFT-HANDED sister gives me her right hand—
fall down in the field, just-cut grass.
We lie stunned on our backs—the sun is a strange circle.
A lawn-mower's vibrating engine fades.

~ Spring, 2000

Dust

THIS DEAD BIRD isn't necessarily
a bad omen. The high window holds
the dust of his body up
to the sunlight—an outline of open feathers
casting weak shadow, disrupting
the flow of heat into my house.

Last night a bird, surely it was
the same bird, flew
ahead of me, like a shadow
into my bright living room.

I opened doors
until the rooms were windy—
but, all night, the bird only rammed hard glass.
I couldn't sleep, that fluttering, dying body
in my house.

This dead bird isn't necessarily
a bad omen, stiff in the red, early light—
her soul printed high on the glass.

~ September, 1999

The Dead Dance

Philip remembers Lucile
in the rain

swinging

by her neck
from a branch
next to him,

staring into his eyes.

He'd swept her off her feet.

What should he wear to the Dead Dance?
What would she like?

He slides open the drawer,
lifts out a liver, other organs, and lays them on top of the dresser.

He tries the lungs on first, watching his body begin to breathe
in the three dusty mirrors.

That looks nice

—no, it's too much
it might upset her.
Perhaps a stomach or a heart.

A heart—yes *better*—he tries that on.

She will only notice if she gets close
and touches him, his pulse
a perfume, and she will gradually
recall

swinging,

and he will hold her then
so she can't pull away.

He'll sweep her off her feet again.

~ *February, 2014*

Apple, banana

HE CLENCHED HIS fist until it was ripe,
then bit into it.

It hurt to swallow the apple. Finished, he peeled
his arm and chewed

the soft banana of his bone. The flavor radiated.

He ate all the fruit in the bowl
and there he was, all that was left—

core, pit, stem, seed.

~ July, 2013

One-way Louise

L OUISE IS so pretty
talking about her pocketbook,
getting blisters, changing her thick
glasses in the bathroom.

She's so pretty
defending her iron deficiency at dinner,
peripherally sexy in candle light,
making up her mind—about you.

Louise is so pretty
sleeping at the top of her one way street,
stomping into town through the puddles.

If I was a tiny man I would knock
on two dangerous front teeth
and wait in line, for Louise.

~ July, 2007

The changing sandwich

WHEN I STARTED eating the sandwich it was a ham, cucumber, and tomato sandwich, which I like—that's why I bought the sandwich.

Later, when I reached the middle of the sandwich, I found I was eating a salmon, egg, and mustard sandwich. I decided I didn't like that as much.

Finally, I discovered I was kissing someone—not eating a sandwich at all—and I wasn't sure if she was dead or alive.

“Why aren't you sure?” She asked.

~ June, 2006

The freeway

HE REACHED INTO his sister's head—
through her eye all the way up to his shoulder,
rummaging around, moving boxes,
candlesticks were falling over—
he could hear them clattering
on her pelvis and ankles
as she ran down the stairs.

At the bottom of the stairs
was the top again
and she could see his arm
reaching up for her
from a great distance.

He found something to hold in her—
a plastic handle of some sort.
He started rolling the handle,
unrolling the window, faster—
and the noise from the freeway rushed in—
and she ran down the stairs towards him.

They almost met that time.

~ June, 2009

She plays piano

SHE PLAYS PIANO like a boy,
slamming different sounding doors

to build the empty house.
She can turn things satisfyingly off

with her foot. She can turn a spider—
off, or a cockroach—off, off, off.

The computer is too important to turn off.
A nauseous quivering lifts

from her captain-sized father.
He is still sitting at the computer

when he jogs down the beach with her,
pretending to love her by skipping rocks.

Even the angels who play with her
appear distracted by something electronic—

they flap like paper bags from phone lines,
and hum at rubber wheels on the busy road.

~ September, 2009

Cave god

HE CAME FROM THE ocean long ago—crawled on His soggy hands here. Now it's ninety thousand B.C. and He lives in a cave, mangy with coarse black hair.

At night He strikes rocks with other rocks, anticipating what? Let there be what? He doesn't even know He is God—learning slowly, evolving slowly.

He makes them in His image: the Cro-Magnon, the Neanderthal. They stumble disoriented into grasslands, dust arms pulled into the sky by tails of wind—there is no Word to bond the atoms yet.

Some days He strays into the forest, seized by a compulsion to kill. Usually He is torn apart by lions and lies on His back—allowing Himself the rest, to be broken—watching dusk point at dawn: pink fingers of cloud extending across the ceiling of their own enormous cave.

~ January, 2013

Juicebox frog

I STOMP ON my juicebox
and glare at the frog.

A juicebox holds one square breath.

Slow motion: pressed, with unfolding cardboard lips,
the glue parts and gives up the ghost.

Imagine your mom blowing a timelapse kiss.

Fast forward: my sneaker is the trigger—bang!—
an itty-bitty soul rides for dearlife a galloping echo.

Does that soaking, stupid frog also square a ripe breath?

Now, when your mom blows a kiss,
her lipsticky mouth parts to allow a bullet
to unseal the tupperware top of the sound barrier—
lets out the quick, killing hand.

So. Who is to blame
if your mother blows a kiss the instant
you pull your sneaker trigger?

~ August, 2005

Brontosaurus

HEAVY Camarasaurus suffers. Children stand in front of his bones and read the name on the plaque: "Brontosaurus." He stares down at them—mouth pried open—hating science.

~ October, 2012

Paleontologist Othniel Charles Marsh put a Camarasaur's skull to the body of an Apatosauruses and claimed he had discovered a new type of dinosaur called a "Brontosaurus"—to outdo his rival paleontologist Edward Dinker Cope during the "Dinosaur Wars" of 1877—1892. Although the Brontosaurus myth was debunked early in the 20th century, their skeletons still stand in natural history museums across America.

Lessons

HIS FATHER throttles the necks
of young elms, shakes the squirrels loose.

His father tells him to notice
how fear has honed instinct, how fantastic
their coiled reflex is, springing to attach to
neighboring limbs; but also how
predictable fear is—the way it follows

the sharp thread of a screw, twisting
up, hesitating, then twisting
back down.

But he can only watch
the green flock
of leaves snap
like his mother's thin hair,
the way his father's heavy fore-
arm, clamped, lung-
ing, pulls.

How, suddenly, he can't twist
far enough behind her thigh—
how he can't escape
the eyes that are shaking
him loose.

~ Fall, 1999

The god of picnics

THIS GREEN god ripped up his hands to scatter on our picnic, but now—without hands—he can't get down from the tree. My daughter helps him by floating a balloon into the branches, then reels it in with him on top. He is soon safe on her lap, holding a grape with two feet—her shy immortal.

We're told not to touch gods, but there seem to be so many this season: above us, huge, three eat clouds and moan—below, a tiny family runs in a line toward someone who is afraid.

~ July, 2012

Picnic

THE DOORKNOB OPENS my hand and the door pulls me until I'm outside myself, aroused: today is our picnic. It's a warm day; I unbutton my chest, loosen my collarbone and watch a girl snap rays of sunlight to suck the sugar out. Birds settle around me like dust motes. You're always late. I untie my feet in the grass by the pond and dig in the dirt for those fish that crumble when you startle their schools; grandfather will give me a penny if I catch one, darting—pinched between my fingers like a fly—and press it into his journal next to the other stains (this is hard, like finding a haystack).

You finally arrive and we drive the steering wheel down the highway. You hold your fingers up to see in five directions, triangulating, locating the farm with the bull; the farmer cut all its legs off at the knee and it charges at us slowly from across the meadow as the sun sets on our picnic. It gets very late. The sky watches clouds pass in your blue eyes. You wonder where that sound is coming from. We search everywhere. "It's coming from my ears," you say at last—and sure enough, all the sound left in the world is creeping out of your little ears. You sniff at me with your mouth. We're tired. There is wind so we pull our hair down tight and climb trees, their huge leaves filling—we sail the trees until we get stuck on a dune of soft laundry and fall slowly, slowly awake.

~ February, 2013

Meaning

IF I STEP backward, I can see that everything is connected—horses, trucks, and clouds are pulled toward me; the sun, dragged through space, roars in protest. Bells ring in distant rooms. If I continue walking back, a painful density of information is reeled in through my eyes—latticeworks of stars pack down into the center. But when I look at the center, I see nothing. There is a dead silence there—where all is joined together.

If I walk forward instead, my chest opens like a drawer and I can peer into its contents. Things are organized neatly: there on the left is my beating heart, there my lungs, there my ribs lined up like handles. I seem healthy and, when I look up, parts of my brain are floating, connected by filament. Finally I reach a throne and the person I want to meet is sitting there, holding out a book. I have no hands to take the book, so can only gaze at letters that swim the pages. The noise is deafening.

~ July, 2013

Love poem for A

I WRITE TO you carefully,
like a brother puzzled
after a warm, sister's kiss.

Two nights ago I swam in nothing
with close friends, a couple. I watched
as they drifted towards each other—
their bodies colliding
as dreams collide, vaguely
overlapping in a brief touch,

how her head slid away,
becoming shadow and air,
as if he were forgetting her.

~ Fall, 1999

She pretends herself

MY PRETEND SISTER is eleven and lives
in the attic of an empty apartment. She unwraps
her dreams like they are presents, all she has.

No one sees her grow, she does it secretly
in the mirror at night—she looks at her fingers
and they extend, then keeps a fist to hide them.

Her hair is never cut or braided—
when a wind gathers around her,
she is a laughing hurricane.

We watch *I Love Lucy* reruns
until she can act whole episodes
for me or nobody; she listens to the History
Channel for entire days.

Her father is part of the history
and the reruns. When he comes home he slaps
or hugs her—it feels the same.

She told me the worst thing is remembering
because then you're just more TV,

so she pretends herself.

~ Fall, 1999

Love poem for A, II

YOU WEAVE animals from your hair,
kissing them with a cut lip
to add blood, ride elephants
that are merely warm lumbering sunlight.

You are full of gifts, but tire quickly,
I see you pull at your arms
like they are loose thread, and I am needed.

“Make love to me, or tell me a story.”

“There was one born who fell in love with a fish.”

“He will drown. Tell a pleasant story, or make love to me.”

“There once was an astronomer who only wished on dead stars.”

“Make love to me.”

When you speak, briefly, I exist.

~ October, 1999

To my Sculpture: A Pygmalion Poem

IN DREAMS I nail together your body
with my own ribs—
my breath spills, rushing,
as if my mouth were a wound.

In the red mornings your silhouette
is, without movement, deformed;
my night is emptied of its dreams.

I watch my wife's hand flinch, inspecting
your cold, perfect curve, and I am ashamed.

I do not love, but deny you—I violate
you intentionally, my tools methodically harass
your shape.

Were are both made angry in this process:

"I will touch again, without hesitation
and harshly—you have no right to life, my creation."

Though in dreams you wake violently,
and force my hand to your warm breast.

~ *Fall, 1999*

Too heavy to live in clouds

YOU TRIP over everything in the house
except me—why am I the only real thing?
I am hurt

like a bird rejected
because it has been handled
by humans.

~ *October, 1999*

I wrote this poem before I asked her out

A HESITANT GIRL with back rimmed
glasses and streaks for eyebrows
sings like storm wind
in the shower three floors down.

She is beautiful and
I don't know what to do.

This is how I daydream about her:
we fly low over boulder fields and
watch our shadows cup
rocks, then skim like breath
along tips of grass and ocean waves.

We are going far—and
I am sure, if she would let me,
I could carry her the whole way.

~ Fall, 1999

I boiled an egg in your absence

WHEN YOU left, the pipes froze.
I filled a pot with snow
and boiled an egg.

You sleepwalk in the coldest weather, drift
from our bed into snow, drift
through locked doors, across dark
rivers. I follow as a shadow,
moving after the body that casts it.

Now, your skin forms inside this shell—
you are summoned into an egg.

I peel and cradle it in my hand.
It is the flesh of your breast, your thigh,
your cheek. In your absence
it is a tender prize.

~ Fall, 1999

White flag

WITH LOOSE, open mouths we splash
wine at wide sky; slash red paintings, slash at air.

Locked up, lips sliding back, spines bent:
skateboards growling across cement

above this room (let me out). The sugar hand: lust,
stuffed like a wet fist in the open gust

of a windy mouth; a whisper's warm draft,
quick chill. Your back: concrete—I beat

to come in; let me out of this room. The still
hard step of the clock's heel, a knock (let me out!)

at the door. I swim in the liquid, splashed wine
of your body; this red, open, furious war—

my arm hanging away, like a flag.
Let me out.

~ Fall, 1999

Blue, cruel lips

Winter,
white, a child, clumsy
dropping his body
in heaps, heavy across
the startled vacancy
of our neighborhood.

This, and I dream
of the woman I must marry—
the cold, long spine; ice
set in her back like a fossil.

I wish the bulge of my pulse
could crack her heart,
revive the pain of living—
but, pressed to her,
my blood turns to a gust,

a sleep loosens my skeleton
from the atmosphere—I fall away,
a clumsy child, floating snow;
my breath is the wind breathing,
my limbs are snow covering
snow, endlessly silencing,
falling snow.

~ Fall, 1999

Friends

Friends, rusty tractors,
rest in grass,
full of picnic wine.

Other friends,
old Toyotas and one blue
dumptruck, a bone gearshift,
some white flowers on the leather,
empty, passenger seat.

Friends in the cracked rear-view,
missing doors, twisted bumpers,
piled junkyard junk,
a chain playfully slapping
after a dog.

Dismantled, relaxing after work,
headlights dusty, surrounded
by wrenches and books, fixing you
tea, sit at the table
with a second hand clatter
and the radio isn't quite tuned in.

Friends, stubborn with phone calls,
pulled over, traded in, broken
smiles on the barge,
get married, love children—

like old toys, buried
in the sandbox.

Watch a spider
crawl into the cab and drive
the whole backyard past puffs of cloud.

~ *December, 2006*

The new boy

BLOSSOMING in red,
she undresses in wind,
sets her glasses on the sand.

The new boy is a stiff reed
hid in the bent dune—
a thief in the dry, hot sun.

Her breasts, white gods,
blind his nude green eye—
the glare of unveiled skin.

She sways to the weed line,
lets the tide spread
its foaming tongue about her calf,

wades in its salty mouth,
her soft length pushing easy
past the surf.

Then a hurried pulse—
her eyes, two scales, flash.
And a boy's stopped, swallowing heart.

His draining mind balks, clear.
Youth drips to his nose,
his fingers find the blood—

a bright rose.

~ Spring, 2000

A letter I wrote you in a dream

A valentine

WHEN I OPENED my eyes
it slipped from me—the letter—
blown down a narrowing, dimming street.
I record its echo here:

... no, I've forgotten.
No evidence—an unreal letter,
written in an impossible,
perfect alphabet. My love, it is a horror
to know I will never be able to say as much
with real words. And as I stand at this
cold window and watch rain blow
forward the curved back of a widow—
I wonder if she never received
a similar letter; the black, tasteless ash
of night's work.

~ *Spring, 2000*

A little pissed

MY KEY WONT fit the rain licked
lock, my wine wet fish hands flip
out of each other, lose the bottle.
My yellow lover at the warm window
slaps her angry lips together.
But Ha! Watch me run
flapping, loose through red fields,
the rain slick roses,
the quivering worms underbarefoot!
See how the tear-brilliant moon
is tinsel all around? How stars splinter
in the cold water of the eye?
My voice-stung heart sings things:
but only odes to you, to you, only odes to you!

You, my drunken drawling darling
have cast me from my hot home
to live in the horrible yard
with slippery rabbits and fanged deer.
They will eat me surely! I will hide
among mossy rocks, like green bears
asleep on the river bank, escape the chilly
blowing earth, the blast, drizzly sneeze,
the muted rain hammering on my hat
and the garden's tapping leaves.
But I am also bold! Watch me jump high
out of my pants and wag my tail for all to see,
All around the wet worried world,

the wormy whistling whirling world:
peeing odes to you, to you, only odes to you!

A jealous gust chases me, it's windy breast
finally heaved against the barn door
might have blown my pants away, perhaps
to become another man in the magic woods—
would you love him then?
He would make leafy love to you, my fleshy girl.
But I remember your clumsy head,
your crooked, sparkling eyes,
your black, burnt hair—
Love, I will sing to you forever
in the soaked belly of this landscape:
odes odes odes to you! Only you to odes!

~ March, 2000

Ballroom Barbie and the Cliffs of Mohor

SUZAN DIDN'T MEAN to do it, She really didn't.
But, in awe, peeking down at doll size waves,
her grip on Kim's small plastic hand gave, just slightly enough
for a playful bit of wind to snatch up the doll—
a pickpocket gust—and fling heavenward
a brand-new Ballroom Barbie.

Poor Suzan, if not for her mother's
instinct-tight fist, would surely have flung herself away
to save a friend. But, captured, could only howl
at the the black, deep ocean, the awful day.

And in that sudden burst—air from a child's burning lung—
Barbie took a breath, and blinked her eyes awake.
Thus born, in ear-blasting wind, she surveyed herself,
felt of her generous tits and ass, her slick, toned, plastic frame,
and was pleased.

By this time Suzan's voice, in all its mournful force
had filled the watery canyon, filled the caves of Mohor.
So charged, the lamentation boomed back—a thunder,
as if the whole tunnelled coast howled out:
from a thousand deep, sea-filled throats,
from the rolling tongues of salty cliff-bound waves,
from the horrible sucking stomachs of gasping emptied caves,
—all cried forth in furious heart-hollowing sorrow,
Kim, the Ballroom Barbie is falling, falling!

And, as if in devious reply,
a flapping updraft flung Kim ripe against the cliffs,
ripping her brilliant ballroom gown.
Stung and shocked, she clawed for a hand-hold, but her stiff hands
could not grip and, helpless, losing balance, she fell back again.
“Is this life?” She cried out, horrified. “To be raped and defiled thus,
to be humiliated and judged in such a way?”
Again she was dashed against the cliff,
again, until nothing remained of her clothing but a floating rag
carried back up to Suzan—to dry her tears.

And so Barbie fell, obscene nipple-less breasts shinning,
anatomically incorrect torso mangled,
fully naked and finally smashed asunder
by the rocky coast of Mohor.

Suzan’s mother held her hand. “Baby, she was only a doll,
we’ll get you another when we get home.” Though, below,
a tiny hand quivered, placed itself upon a plastic chest
to feel the first, and last heartbeat,
barely alive in a magical and unfair world.

~ *Spring, 2000*

Ennis

A NIGHT AGO I wrote to you
about the sea, how it haunts
this village with rain.
How the mist, like a ghost
huddles in your clothing, with you:
the vagrant Loneliness.

~ Spring, 2000

Wishing for the tired

THEY MAKE LOVE with their watches on,
stare at television, mute. They dream about rushing
water, leaving each other, but forget
everything in the morning.

He washes off the dead skin, examines
his teeth. She waters plants, burns
eggs, and loses something for the comfort
of finding it someday.

Sometimes he wishes she would turn into a fly
and float away from him across the city—
she would never find her way back.

Loneliness makes her breath cold
when she sits at work. The picture of him tacked
to her cubicle is only a face to puzzle her.
She wishes he looked at the camera.

Later, she observes his fingers
active on her, considers how they
re-trace the same paths: he is going to work,
he is staying alive. She thinks of the blood
filled spider she spread across her white
refrigerator door, finds his erection.

~ November, 1999

To Isabella: you can borrow my scissors ¹

In defense of Claudio, Angelo, and me.

IF YOU HAVE no need for your body
give it to us; we are suffocated beneath
that rough cloth. The fantastically
pale leg of a untouched girl cannot be thawed
by God's cold hand.

Prostitutes don't need heads, in hell
we're all sure they can manage without,
therefore behead them—nuns too—
They don't need their sex. In heaven
angels are wing'ed faces; flesh
is for us or the earth to digest, you will not
take it with you.

All this and more is reason enough,
though we tire wording our reason.
If His breath is wind on a dark day
but one last thing:
chastity is the kite's uncut string.

~ Fall, 1999

¹ Isabella is a nun-to-be in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*.

I daydream when kissing

KISSING IS THE closest people get to eating each other (I emote, you taste good, like food). I think, actually, you taste better because you never go down (my throat! my throat! I'm never never full!). Think: we are fish stuck to the sides of a tank, unfocused stupid eyes. We are too close to see each other—I use this time to daydream.

~ *Spring, 2000*

Mary Poppins in OZ

IF WE JOIN hands and jump into the chalk,
and feeling around find a dry yellow knob,
and opening that door, enter an even more
yellow place, everywhere dark with yellow—
dogs bounding off into the emptiness of it
while our eyes sting, and shapes refuse
to be shapes—moving shaggy fogs
of yellow only—and our hands, horribly, vanish
into it, as we wade through it, the powdery fur of it,
as it sticks in our throats and dyes us with fever—
and dragges us by our scruffs along what feels like
a brick road ... we'd finally know where we were—
we'd know we were in OZ.

~ September, 2008

A daughter's death

IN THE SUBWAY (a dream) he sees a black eyed boy holding three keys. One is a tooth, one is a silver necklace, and one is his own hand. He asks the boy which door his hand opens. The boy points to a white eyed girl falling carefully onto the rails—trains punch the tunnel close to her face. He holds out his huge hand, to save her. When she takes it there is ice in his body, the boy turns. “That wasn’t the right key.” Awake: the wind, horrified in the tunnel, hurries ahead of his train.

~ Spring, 2000

When the rain comes

WHEN THE rain comes, in winter
and the sky leans back, sweeping her
windy hair across the field, snaps
water out against the thick sides
of our house, our bodies, I think
of your dark mouth on mine, like a storm,
as the rain shoulders the window's frame,
a gust works its fist at our door.

~ Spring, 2000

I saw a butterfly

I SAW A butterfly land
on the tongue of a sky-blue girl.
Her eyes wore clouds, as if
each were a shadowed world, shifting
in the seat of a sad cheek.
“She’s as thin as a wing,”
her mother says, hurrying.
“She wont eat anything
but a butterfly on a blue day.”

~ Spring, 2000

Keyhole

I SET BONE in a keyhole
and grow flesh to fit the lock.

Toweled black hair
of the almost-drowned,

what shoves you awake in the night?
Dreams about holding a knife,

or the mess a cat makes
trying to scrape off your makeup?

Look: tiny planets float
into your mouth, like flies.

~ July 2007

Poem for Kelly

KELLY, I WAS killed last night.
I borrowed the camp Volvo for a break
from my kids (12 years old and I read to them at night).
Emily, a girl with hair like yours, road shotgun.
We drank enough, kissed freely on the black
roads. I suddenly needed cold air—gasping—
to roll down every window, I was so thirsty.
I arched back, twisting—I remember—
to spin open the rear window. She had the
wheel and one crawling hand on my leg.
Air rushed in and the car woke up like
an animal set loose. I tried for the brake
but it wasn't there, only her stiff hand.

And I just wanted to say your name again,
since we don't always get these opportunities,
and that I miss you, Kelly.

~ Summer, 2000

The mill, the man

THE HAMMER and arm—
the pain of pounding.
The tired bone, dislocated
by the muscle, instructed
by the brain—to work.

The brushed steel,
the brushed teeth of the giant
saw, the pitched scream
of the blade,
of the grooved tooth
of the drill.

The wood that we breath.
The heat and sawdust of skin,
the meal, the powder of bone—
the powder and breath
of the mill.

The product:
the chair and the angle,
the table and square,
the jaw of the man, taught
by piston and pulley.

The knot and the heart,
the trunk, the organs and thread
of the grain and the skin.

The nail, the staple, the rot
and wound. The growth ring and sap.
The ripe bark that sweats,
cleaned by rain and by spit.

The diesel and driver.
The payload and coffin.
The hand and the ax.

The eye that selects,
and then aims.

~ January, 2001

The swiftly moving cow

IN INDIANA'S afternoon we mistake
distant bikers for swiftly moving cows,
or a bails of hey, silhouetted,
blowing noisily across the plains.

Closer,
their suspicious, polite waving,
obedient glancing at road signs,
and frowning, clinging, old wives
alert us.

These are not the patriotic, violent
Denis Hopper, the indolent Peter Fonda.
No, here is something altogether new.

In gift shops their full
vocabularies, quoting, soft spot
for snow globes, key chains,
postcards, memorabilia in general

finally gives them away:
they are a gaggle
of retired English teachers!

come to haunt the real, wordless world.
Now we cringe! Now we see the disguise!
Look: the beady analyzing eyes, the judging!

Listen: "Should this post card be included
In my cannon of postcards?"
These are men, truly, to be feared!

Ah, but this is the effect books have. Year
after year of reading has reduced them to it.

One catches us staring.
"Yes, my friends," he grandiloquently intones,
"the tattoos are real: '*bos sum celeripes*.'"

I am the swiftly moving cow.

~ July, 2002

Sand brain

YOU'RE RECKLESS with your naked hull,
ramming it into the sand brain of a boy.
He has never seen a woman, girl.

~ July, 2000

Dusk

OUR CHILDREN are already
holding hands with nightmare children—
talking in their sleep. Cold dreams,
we can see their breath.

~ *Summer, 2000*

Water calmer

S HE CAN calm water.
Her fingers dance many touches—
rain flattening a churned lake,
a wind-beaten chest—
the chest of a boy, upset, eleven.

Ending, the last sigh
bends the trees across the lake
toward us, streaks the water.
But in her white hair, air slows,
spreads out careful on the sand—
watch her hand. He falls
asleep.

~ *Summer, 2000*

A diner party, and the backyard

NIGHT FALLS across the lawn,
chilling the insects—they rattle
in their little armor.

I shouldn't be here, brooding
while the dinner guests arrive.

Instead, I'll scoop fifty crickets
from the grassy backyard
and stuff my cheeks full. When I talk,
I will either let forth a glorious
cricketish sing-song to please and subdue the
mature, overflowing brains
of our guests, or

a ball of soaking crickets will drop
into my asparagus.

A lie creates a strong wind—
this conversation will sail:

"Architecture," someone replies, validly.
Next, Trish, rich, lies while she chews—
oh, about anything in particular,
pausing to tighten the knot above her tan
navel. She wants me to wish I had a small husband
I could order to make bad investments.

Her new house is sinking away
and all she can talk about is the humongous
hammer that drove pilings down
to save her basement, thank God.

And my dad there in the middle of it,
arranging us into some geometrically correct
encounter—and it doesn't matter what we say,
as long as we speak highly of artists.

Who will it be who finds me tonight,
my brains overflowing like spilt milk?

~ July, 2005

Gunshots and apples

WHEN I WAS seven I was made of dirt—
my friends punched holes through me.
I packed in rocks and mud, ran off.

When I was seven I had seven friends—
our fourteen hands got tight with muscle.
We tried to punch life out, fought mad.

When I was seven I didn't know
a noise could punch a hole through someone—
we looked down at holes the size of apples.

When I was seven I lined up seven apples
on hot train rails behind our building.
They burst like hearts under guns.

~ *Summer, 2000*

Something tiny

SHE TURNS TO me and opens her mouth.
There's a sound, like something tiny
has cracked.

Like time is tiny,
like a television is tiny,
a tiny crumbling covering.

She rides bareback, the galloping ant.
"I love ants, like strange horses," she says,
leading the beast to the barn.

The fat woman reaches over me
for her glasses, so she can read.

"It's late," she tells me.

Something thuds on the door like a newspaper.

Her belly is big. When I touch, she says,
"I can feel him winding up,"
then gives birth to a clock.

"Fat woman," I say, "I am in love with someone else."
But the legs of the spider tick,
and sew my teeth to the root.

I wade through melted ice cream

to your mouth, in a more fortunate time,
where glass ships sail the prism winds,

where red light is husked away,
and pushes us blue and yellowly

to islands with awful jetties.
The equatorial easterly blows our hut,
the westerly, the easterly, the westerly—
it's like a footstepping,

and a footstep is a kiss,
and a kiss is a second less
of what is measured
when anything is measured.

If I had to choose your most charming feature
I would say, "Bring me a menu!"
The waiter points, rudely:
"The skull is the easiest bone to identify."

But I'll tell you later, under the table:
it's your ring finger.

The fat woman says,
"I want my money's worth!
I want to fall forward into a soft pillow
of what I deserve."

But the seed wasn't designed properly,
and the shell is very hard—

nothing can get in, thank god,
but nothing will get out.

~ July, 2008

Vampires, Werewolves, Zombies

THERE ARE EVIL PEOPLE called Vampires who are born and decay in a very short period of time—only eighty years or so—while the rest of us are forced to suffer their jealousy. We identify Vampires by their stunted teeth, ruddy skin, physical weakness, and constant complaining. Some become so enraged by their disadvantages they hammer wooden stakes into the hearts of our more dapper and distinguished citizens. In fact, the only way to defend yourself from a Vampire in one of these violent tantrums is to bite it on the neck and drain its blood; the task is made easier by seducing the Vampire beforehand—it becomes pliable and easy to puncture.

If Vampires weren't enough, there are Werewolves stalking our foggy woods and marshland. Once a month, during the full moon, they fill their pistols with silver and run in packs through the woods, shaking torches, shooting their victims in the heart. An insult worth retaliation, no doubt there—but Werewolves are exceedingly difficult to dispatch. If it is attempted, approach the pack quietly and pick them off, dragging each separately into the forest, seizing its limbs in your mouth and shaking vigorously.

Of course, the most dreadful scourge are the Zombies, who don't pause to discriminate; they'll use all manner of weapons—shovels, shotguns, hammers, knives, household furniture—towards one goal: to forcibly remove your head from your body. Holding both arms out in front of you affords some degree of protection, but the only surefire way to halt their mad obsession is to eat their whole body mouthful by mouthful. The following technique is especially effective: open their bellies by pressing down with your fingernails and scoop large amounts of intestine into your mouth. It should also be noted that moaning frightens Zombies into dropping their weapons—so try moaning, even while eating a Zombie.

~ February, 2013

Subtle

“THIS PART isn’t very subtle,” his teacher screamed, hammering her fist on the table. “I think you need to tone it down!”

He felt like screaming, but he was already screaming. Everyone in the cafe was screaming. “Are you sure?” He wailed hysterically. “I didn’t make that part up—my sister actually said that!” He picked up a chair and threw it over his head through a window.

His teacher climbed onto the table and started firing bullets from a revolver into the ceiling, “I’m sure!” she shrieked. “You need to let your poem breathe!”

~ November, 2008

Homesick

I T'S GETTING dark.
I speed out of the city
past rows of crops.
Spitball bugs dim the
headlights to a glow and
soon larger bodies snap
like hail on the windshield—
locusts. Now birds—
their wings spread
and untie shoelace bodies.
I turn on the wipers.
I feel the squash
of rodents under the wheels
and the steering slips.
I hit a dog—some mutt—
and many dogs
until all sorts of animals roll up
off the hood, their bodies
swerve, dark, heavenward.
When I rub my eyes
I think I've hit a little girl,
or a whole family;
the father holds out
his arms to stop me, but
I'm driving so fast, so fast,
and I'm running out of time
for the friends I love—
their open hands squeak

on the windshield and nothing
is alive in the rear view.
I see my mother standing
in the road, reading a book.
I stop the car and get out.
“I’m really tired, Mom.”
“Well, you’re home now.”

~ June, 2006

Illegal entry

MY POCKETS are full of letters
as I approach your door,
they jingle in my head like loose change.
Wonder if I have enough quarters
to park today.

I like to fiddle with I's the most,
they're so fat and squishy
like a Twinkie.
The u's are a bit different and harder
to locate,
and harder to squeeze.
They like to slip
and flip their fishy tails
back into the surf of conversation.

Your mouth is busy today—
all sorts of things go in and out,
so I sip on the alphabet served,
separate the u's with my spoon,
and burp out a few thoughts,
but politely.

Soon we retire
to the sitting area
and swat at topics with
our flat tongues.

"Crime is on the rise you know."
That's old news to the criminal
who shifts in his seat to avoid
detection.

“You’re glad to see me.”
No it’s just my gun, you know
crime is on the rise
in this town,
crime isn’t too uncommon
in this household I herd
crime is welcome
if it can fit the punishment.

“Well is it a felony, or just
a misdemeanor?” She laughs.
I’ll leave that to the judge
though I am
a multiple offender.

“Ambiguous poet!”
The metaphor breaks
and her hands are working
in the dough,
kneading and slapping
and pounding the mound
into shape.

At a dimmer dinner ...

“But you haven’t finished your
soup.” Ah, I ate all I could, dear.
The last few letters,
they were tough and indigestible,
save them for later.

“I’ll put them in the freezer.”
U on ice—
cold and lost somewhere behind
the mayonnaise.

~ December, 1997

Thy lips are warm: Juliet the necrophilic

BENEATH THE BONE of my jaw
she is alive—heavy, humid,
lips searching the pipes of my neck.

Slack on the tide of her lung's sound
I sway in, spill away, down,
a half awake thing—a dream drowned.

These numb eyes unfocused stare cooling,
her tongue glowing through the ceiling of my chest—
the draft of her breath stirring this sleep soaked soul.

The smooth flesh clamp of her legs
melting stale flanks—the press of her damp
belly easing, lower, deliberate.

This is thy sheath,
this is thy vault,
this is thy tomb.

Thus with a kisse I dye.

~ November, 1999

War wed

I

WHEN MY MUM throws flowers,
their will be whistling petals in the air—to count

with number 2 pencils, under classroom desks,
and crushed fistfuls to smell.

When we raise two battleships
caped with weed, who clang their shoulders

to prop each other up, who clang lips
like patina bells, their guns will droop and push out

soggy shells. Torpedoes will roll unfastened from their bows
and explode in our bellies and kitchen sinks,

or not, duds, slapping wet propellers like goldfish,
murmuring, “Heads, tails, boom boom boom,

boom smash the china, boom
boom the glasses, pow the plates,

the cutlery shrapnel and collateral kids’
cups oh who cares, throw the fucking mess out.”

II.

If we command our battleships to rust,
to grow flowers in slow salute

to chirping, flapping captains, to the ranks
of radishes, and bowing, seasick sprinklers—

if we let two battleships fold their wrinkled
hulls together, in matrimony,

can we safely return fire,
swim away, use contraception, invest well—

stagger from the rip, a starboard step, a port step
and kiss the shores of alien lives?

If they beach themselves on the brains
of distant friends, and vow, under starlight:

“I am your iceberg,
you are my iceberg,”

to sit, lights out, moored at each end of the table
(which is an awful, wooden country),

while our socks, then pants soak through
(and fish nibble at our plates),

well then? Can we explore them with flashlights?
Will we find a table set for ghosts? For—even—us?

III.

Dead people say that is death is a wilder
and open place, hard to smell.

Let's sail our battleships to that wild place,
and war—

these quiet wars we take there.

~ May, 2005

Jim met this god at a party

S HE WAS NOT THE GOD of parties—that was clear—all alone on a couch in the corner, sucking on a beer.

Jim sat down next to her and tapped out a cigarette. Anyone could see she was out of his league.

“You look angry,” he said.

“I’m a god. I’m always angry.”

Jim laughed. “A god? Yeah right.”

She snatched his lighter, pushed it into her ear, shook her head so he could hear it rattling around, then spit it out.

“See, I’m thinking and talking without a brain.” She slapped the lighter onto his palm.

“Uh ... what does that prove?”

“That I’m not a bunch of electricity bouncing around inside a bag of meat. This body means nothing to me.”

Jim didn’t *know* that she was flirting with him, but he decided to go for it anyway.



The sex was okay. Afterwards, she lit one of Jim’s cigarettes and blew smoke at his face.

“Mortal,” she said and started laughing. “You know, you’re a pretty lousy invention, Jim.”

“What do you mean ‘invention?’”

“Well, gods can’t just create a life form out of thin air. We have to have an idea, a design. We have to understand the science.”

“Really? Actually ... that makes sense to me.”

She rolled her eyes. “Wow, you are dense—I’m messing with you, *Jim*.”

Look over there.” She snapped her fingers and a small dinosaur appeared. She snapped again and it was gone.

Jim jumped out of bed. “Holy shit! That was fantastic!”

“A party trick. You’re all a bunch of party tricks.”

Jim scowled. “Okay, if it’s so easy, then make a new kind of animal.”

She snapped her fingers lazily and a large rodent lifted its head from under a pair of Jim’s underwear.

“That’s a prairie dog.”

She shrugged, snapped her fingers twice, and the prairie dog was replaced by a marsupial with a white stripe across its chest.

“That’s a Tasmanian Devil.”

“No it’s not.”

“I did my summer abroad in Australia. Why do you keep making things from Australia?”

Two more snaps. A huge mouth hovered in the air, full of long curved teeth. It’s translucent skin shimmered. Jim was dumbstruck for a moment, until he saw that the thing was in distress, gulping for air.

“It’s a fish! Wait, I know—I’ve seen those things on National Geographic.” Jim laughed. “It’s a deep water fish.” He grinned at her. “You can’t do it, can you? You can’t make something new.”

“Of course I can.”

“No, you can’t.” The fish fell to the floor with a slap and then vanished. “So it is evolution!” Jim shouted. He felt like he had to tell someone. He picked up his cellphone and started dialing his friend Norman.

~ October, 2012

Highway Firefly

I am the firefly
streaking by your window pane—
the lightning squiggle-zip
blurry through the window rain.

Fear me
roaring with my light
lonely in the night.

~ June, 1997

Our robot Larry

LARRY'S HEART is an old tennis ball.
He let me shoot it out with a crossbow
and Buck chased it down the driveway.

From a distance Larry looks like my dad
standing next to himself, or helping himself
home from the bar. From a distance
Larry could look like a lot of things.

Mom says I program Larry when I talk to him,
and his program gets longer and more complicated—
but that he doesn't "think" like I do.
Sometimes I wonder about that.

He stares at horses in the barn
when his chores are done, and horses
follow him when he's in the fields.
His small eyes seem confused

when we turn him on in the morning,
and he takes a while to wake up.
I'm not sure I like Larry but I'm pretty sure
Larry doesn't like me.

~ 2010

Down the street

JOEY WAS raisin-eyed with block fingers
too thick to fit in his nose—
trying left it bruised and crooked.
He wore dust, coughed dust, left a dusty
lip stain on our juice bottle.
But he was red on the inside. He showed me
his tongue and in his ears
where his dad couldn't get.
Mandy (his sister, 5) asked me to pick
the scab from the cigarette burn
on her back, she couldn't reach it.
She liked to feed her Barbies to the dog
and eat dead bumble bees and fart
on Joey when he wasn't looking.
She was my brother's first kiss, caught
and pinned him under the sprinkler.

~ Summer, 1997

Joe and Sally were going steady when ...

JOE SCREWED Sally's little sister,
so she sucked the cum out of his best friend
walked to his house without swallowing
and spit in his face.

Then she calmly explained where the white syrup
gathering in the crease of his mouth
came from.

The pause in a moment like this—
the malfunction of a simple reality, halting,
lurches people forward, out of their bodies
into a quiet nakedness, a horror.

In this pause he loosened his jaw,
which she quickly brought to her own,
pushing in her raw, cold tongue.

Sally walked home that night, letting her breath
steam across her cheeks and melt,
smelling how human it was
against the chill of suburban air.

~ September, 1997

The stupid sheep

THAT SHEEP is stupid.
It's just chewing and looking at my face.
Does it think it's eating my face?
You're not eating my face!

~ July, 2006

God is the size of a cow

GOD is about the size of a cow.
He doesn't seem to mind us,
but he is puzzled by rush hour,
wandering on the highway
as we drive around him.

He attends church from the pew in back,
flipping through clothing catalogs,
unwrapping different colored candies
with his stone fingers.

He was first seen on a freight train
headed for Santa Monica in a hailstorm.
There were no signs he was coming.
We dragged him in a large net to a field
where he shook himself free,
unfolding his wings to dry in the sun.
A girl helped him to handfuls of dirt
and dandelions began to grow from the cracks
on his shoulders, and from his nose.

~ August, 2008

My father's hands

MY FATHER HAS masons hands that crush
limestone, kneed oak and iron, forcing
shape into weak, exhausted objects—
gifts for a hungry family.

My mother is severe and rough
to the marrow. She sits hard, a woman's weight.
Thin legs he carves for her can only cry,
splinter at the joints—
too frail to support (but beautiful).

My sister is still baby pink, wrinkled—
not quite grown into her skin,
but could still burst her new red rattle
on the bars of the crib—
stunned in a bath of wooden beads
(but it was only a toy).

Even the wind was too clumsy
to hold the balsa glider he built for me,
the wings peeled along the glue—
spun like oak seeds
(we'll build another).

But it does hurt
and fingers can't hold it in—
tears still streak dirt down
to the wrist.

My father's hands are not like mine,
heavy tools he hangs across my shoulders—
my hands are useless,
I can't even make something
that will break.

~ *Summer, 1998*

Island

*Why is it so dark?
In the beginning it is always dark.* ¹

THE STEEL IN the steeple sings,
its hard sting leaping at the spray
of water on the jetty, a burst of ocean wings—
our cold faces rise to a sun's display
that won't allow for new beginnings.

Eternity is in love with the productions of time. ²

—The windmill's wooden sail inflated.
—The slow pulse of the dim lighthouse light.
—The knot of lines sinking deep and baited.
—The chain of our anchor twisted, tight.
We approach eternity with these tied, tired hands.

Perfect speed, my son, is being there. ³

Slickers freeze on raw, slow wrists.
Our boats hang off waves, pull astern.
A fatigued air escapes our mouths—mists—
vicious without hope's fired lantern.
Even the now would be new here—we are never there.

We've come too far. Who can live in the world anymore? ⁴

Our children gather icy shells—

watch stiff gulls float against white skies
scanning hard land and salt water swells—
their hearts, thin from restless sighs,
understand that something is missing.

~ *Fall, 1998*

¹ Michael Ende, *The NeverEnding Story*.

² William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*.

³ Richard Bach, *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*.

⁴ John Barth, *The End of the Road*.

Lion

I AM a lion,
a heavy stretch of loose flame
—which would your rather:
my fangs on your neck
or on your groin?

Stretched jaws tightening
on a taut throat?
Or the sudden pressure
of hunger between weak thighs?

Does your blood sink
or does it rise?

Imagine the awareness,
how gently tooth splits skin—
the panicked stiffness of the lungs.

Have you ever seen an antelope's eyes,
exhausted with passion,
ravaged from so much heat?
Lying torn and still,
amazed.

~ October, 1998

Little birds

THE SKY breathes breezes—
suggestions for little birds
who live to be nudged astray.

A bird flies ahead,
into my headlights, and harnessed,
drags my sports car up the hill.

I see a bird fly at the wind and stick—
like a thumbtack—to space.
I pick him out of the sky
and wrap him chirping,
still flapping, as a gift.

~ February, 2007

A pledge

I PLEDGE ALLEGIANCE to myself
and the United Limbs of Myselfia
and to the legs on which I stand,
one person, underpaid, invisible,
with bigotry and prejudice for all.

~ 1998

She hated the dog

SHE HATED the dog. It was her pet—
I hated the dog, for breakfast,

when she served him in a bowl, hot.
I could see his paw marks on broken

snow near the doghouse. The broth
and steaming spirit hovered

while something with a smaller life
flashed its mirrors from the yard.

~ August, 2008

My father's dream

THE ROUND-FACED driver rolls us
hypnotically over hills—Erie's cradles—
my eyes sink, fields blur.
The moon's light, minnows in grass,
chases mice into black houses.

My father has been here, on this island.
He has seen this moon—
he left my mother for this moon.
I am here as a stray, I wander after
his sleeping mind.

I see pale girls wandering—
the moonlight's minnows splash,
stirring grass by their ankles.
Their milky bodies press against my back,
their fingers touch my face,
soak through my clothes, through my arms,
their tongues of milk, a thousand tongues,
flow in my mouth—my head rushes,
I break apart in a flood,
blood in their throats, their lips close—
my freezing mother shakes me awake.

The sky widens, an opening pupil.
I know this is his dream that haunts me
as I haunt these roads,
the swelling, flattening pavement.

My sister, thousands of miles gone,
sits by me. Her mouth, a warm shell, covers my ear—
Listen to the ocean. Have you found him?

Behind her, a woman flashes—
the moon, swimming,
gleaming through corn—
diving shining over fences,
tossing aside sheep who float
softly back—they graze on glittering
minnows, the moon's squirming light,
shimmering bodies flipping
from our beams.

I feel my choking mother
shaking me awake, moonlight in her eyes.
I try to help, but my dreams are a blanket
I can't lift. I struggle to wake
even as the lights of the ambulance fade
from the ceiling of my room.
My choking mother shakes me awake
with her freezing hands.

My reflection in the window shakes.
I know this is my father's dream,
minnows darting under the rocks—
that moon urging a strange freedom.

~ Spring, 2000

Weeding in the Garden of Eden

SO ANYWAY this girl ran around grabbing dicks and yanking them out, ducking between hairy legs and snipping away with garden sheers—she loved the feel of that detachable flap of skin that just wanted to be torn out—the worst kind of weed.

They all had to go:
The itsy bitsy fish stick dick,
the plump mellow twinkie dick,
and the heavy hand-full of the Big Mac, the Whopper dick.
The sound thrilled her, earth tearing in the roots of their bellies
as the last few sinews thinned to thread.

Sometimes she was nice and just hid the stolen dicks,
in light fixtures and ovens—there was still hope
as men ran chicken-eyed, searching, covering their holes
as if what wasn't there was just as bad as what had been.

But she could be mean too.
Some were tossed in blenders, merged with eggs and orange juice,
some swelled in her microwave, yeasty, then burst.
Some were tossed to her high pitched pointy toothed poodle—
but most of the time she just stamped them out,
the insides slipping away like soap from a baby's hand
—skin shriveling like a balloon loosing water.

She draped this suit
as an ornamental warning from the boughs her tree,
billowing with the rustle of pantyhose and linen—

dry scalps of deflated snakes
that would never bite through the seal of her red fruit
—pop her knowledge cherry.

So when she spat,
rubbed her hands together and wrapped a firm
ten finger grip around me,
I wondered what I would think about
in the gloom, the fog of empty fields
that would follow.
And I admit, all I could see was disbelief
as she pulled the plug.

I awoke feeling strangely light,
as if gravity had only been interested in that one thing—
hundreds of like afflicted stood with me,
wondering patiently at high white walls,
waiting for the energy splash of razor blues,
molten yellows, lighting pink and black.

~ February, 1999

A traitor

MY YOUNG COUSIN hands me her son.
The boy-father drove like a frightened
deer into Canada—to cut trees.
She asks me for a name, because I like words.
His wet eyes widen at me—how can I do this?
My face is suddenly a plate he thuds his fists against,
his soft skull rolling in the bowl of my hand.

~ Spring, 2000

Breaking up

NORMALLY I'D TRY to forget you. But I did think of you several nights ago. The car was speeding towards a deer not two miles from here. She was already dead

when the grill rammed her head off. Lying in the road just old—or, hey, maybe a soccer-mom didn't notice the bump over the kid's screams. But I'm making a joke out of this

when I shouldn't. This is serious and I'm bitter and I swear that deer left her eyes open to watch me, with a cold brain, slam into a skid, slam awake into you. So this is me spinning,

jaw locked. This is me looking you hard in your face before the grill bites (I can't slow down). This is me realizing I ran into you hard, and it was intentional.

~ *Summer, 2000*

Lonely girl

THE GIRL SLEEPS with the window open above her bed—she is too hot and kicks the sheets.

A cat jumps through the window
and laps at water in a glass.
The girl has never seen this cat,

or the little boy who follows, stepping
gingerly onto the bed, then over her
to play games on her computer.

The boy's mother swings her legs
past the window sill; she scolds him quietly
so they don't wake the girl.

A man arrives and drops his briefcase—
the boy jumps into his arms, and they spin.
His wife watches them, filled with love.

They find some leftover Chinese food
in the girl's little freezer, and sit down to eat—
the boy whispers about his day at school.

Once he's fast asleep in the laundry basket,
husband and wife undress
and slip into bed next to the girl.

They all leave when the sky lightens,
each giving the girl a kiss on the forehead.
They know she feels lonely in the big city.

~ April, 2007

Mouth light

MY BABY COUSIN grabs at fireflies,
pops them in his mouth.
We watch his cheeks glow on off.

~ Spring, 2000

Mashed squirrel hearts

EIGHTEEN WHEELS weren't enough to beat out
all the movement. Plumed tail still waves gaily
at its furry lover (who's stunned but safe in a raspberry bush)—
she doesn't understand his flatness. *Romeo!*

She squeaks again, approaches reckless, Juliet.

~ February, 1998

Dog

AUGUST IS THE month of the dog.
It is your month, your eyes wag
when I get home. The dog brain
that populates the heavy skull of
ordinary people, like you,
operates thus: something misplaced
that finds the way home somehow,
the way somehow home.

~ *Summer, 2000*

Now that down is up

YOUR GLASS BRAIN refracts ideas,
scatters a family of related reasons
across the country of your misunderstanding.

I would like to break all the windows in
your head, but my wit is a bat without a ball.
You are insane, I have concluded,
with stubbornness. I will walk home
on the sky.

~ January, 2001

Summer help

YOU'VE TRAVELED from distant Bulgaria
to whiten my picket fence.

Your aging boss hallucinates
his dry hands stuffed deep,
searching the moist field
of your summer night, pulling out
blue and yellow kites that he and I
will run into the sky to celebrate

your ass crack,
balanced on the unsafe ladder,
clutched by the squeeze of spotted jeans.

Sleep with me tonight.
I will bury my face
in that pudgy sun-burnt bloom.

I will swim for days in your ass,
finally reaching that distant shore
where orphaned secrets dance.

As payment, I will shave
your slavic upper lip and, sweating,
mow every yard in enormous Bulgaria.

~ August, 2008

To your

YOU SAY your red hair is beautiful
I say you have no hair.

You say your blue eyes—
I say you have no eyes.

You say your—
You have no lips.

It happens faster than you can talk.

~ April, 2014

Breakthrough

HOW ARE WE going to explore the galaxy? Relativity states that infinite amounts of energy are required to accelerate objects past the speed of light ... which seems impossible, until you discover the loophole. Phenomenon that *already* move faster than the speed of light exist—tachyons, for example. So what if light was the slowest thing in the universe, not the fastest? I.e., what if we behaved like tachyons and set the speed of light to 0? In that case, when we stand still, we're moving at a constant rate of 670,616,640 miles per hour, according to the old measurements. And when we walk forward at 2 miles per hour, we're really moving at a speed of 670,616,642 miles per hour. Once you start looking at it that way, the rest is easy.

~ December, 2015

Bill and Mabel buy smart-phones

“GIVE THAT ROBOT a gun,” said Mabel. “I want to see what it does.”

Bill was checking street names on his Blackberry. He had refused to buy an iPhone and was paying the price. “I think we’re lost. Hey Robot! Come here. It’s okay, yeah, come on over.”

The robot took the gun and started firing at them.

“That was so disappointing,” Mabel said, after they’d smashed it. “It didn’t even think about it.”

Bill nodded while he guzzled gasoline from a pump. Mabel filled a trash barrel nearby with Super Unleaded Ultra and sipped meditatively. “I’ve always wanted to yell *brownian motion* on a packed elevator.”

“Small audience for that one,” Bill said, wiping his mouth. “Let’s try the Verizon store again.”

~ September, 2013

Payday

I SEE BRIAN A couple times a week, usually on my way to the 1 train at 110th and Broadway. He's just like the other bums, holding out his hand—but the funny thing about Brian is his debit card. Sometimes, when he's in a good mood or drunk, he'll wave it around.

Brian says he made a lot of money in his thirties—won't say how or how much—but he can't remember the PIN on his debit card. When I see him, he's usually hanging around outside the Bank of America ATM on 107th and Broadway. Sometimes he'll get up off his blanket, swipe into the locked vestibule, and punch at the keypad on the ATM. The employees there don't seem to mind; eventually he heads back into the street. But here's the thing—Brian says sometimes he *does* remember his PIN—once every few months. He calls it *Payday*—"Here I am just like you, waitin' for another Payday. Joke's on us."

On Payday Brian says he takes out the daily limit, \$1000—he buys fresh boxers, socks, slacks, shoes, and a shirt at the Banana Republic on 86th and Broadway—and then he checks into the Waldorf-Astoria—an Executive King suite. "They've got a computer there. I know how to use computers." He schedules a dentist appointment with ZocDoc, logs onto Lavalife, books a date, takes a few showers, and, if things go his way, makes love to a woman that night. The next day he has brunch at the Boathouse in Central Park, goes to his dentist appointment, and catches a taxi back to the Bank of America on 107th street.

He told me the story one morning as I reached for change, confused by his new clothes.

"Yesterday was Payday," he said apologetically.

~ January, 2013

Beemer

Okay, you're gone—
I should water the plant
in that one quiet room.

Things that calm me: I'm outside.
My pants are soft (they're new).
The stones on the patio feel warm.

Suddenly I fall asleep.

My indoor cat is at the window
with her fangs stretched,
a silent, human scream:
“Get down!”

Alarms go off and men in uniform
approach me, lift off my head,
look under every one of my fingers,
but can't find me anywhere.

I'm speeding down the turnpike in my dad's beemer.
It's fall. Colored leaves, sucked between the tires,
slap and stick to the car paint.
You're sitting next to me blinking on and off.
You say, “I'm desperately happy.”

When I spin the wheel, the spirit appears.
Do you see it, this time? I'll show you.

It's walking across the windshield;
each leaf is a foot print.
Much easier to see in slow motion—
we're being stamped out.

I'd love to take a photograph.
You're so beautiful, surprised like this,
your hair graphing our trajectory.

I will take you to the waterfall
where you mother slipped.

I will take you to the well
your father chose.

We're on the road, after all.

~ July, 2005

Hot mouth: an intersection

or Run her red.

HER ASS swings, a wrecking ball,
demolishing trains
of thought
up and down Broadway—
and *I'm* supposed to hold her arm.

She steals traffic lights,
ties the power lines around her neck
and wears *Stop, Go, Hesitate*
like jewelry.

Sadly, the worthless owns her heart:
the bone-thin cat, the over-
coated man, the dog, the bag,
the lie, the sickness.

She'll tell you how to stand,
eat, think, and talk.
And you'll do it. All for the chance
to choose a direction
through her intersection.

~ January, 2001

His heart

HIS HEART REPLACED his penis and his
penis replaced his heart, so his
penis thumped all day against his lungs
and his heart became erect
each morning;
nights he walks thirsty through allies
craving love.

Once he found a lover in a dumpster—
he gnawed the bones anyway,
though his heart burnt his legs.
He tried to cool it on metal
lamp posts, and with ice,
but it wouldn't cool off.

At the office he sits shivering
behind a computer screen full of numbers,
numbers that suffocate him,
they fill his throat.
He grips his breast and types,
“Wonderful.”

He daydreams of attacking everyone
with the water cooler, then
drinking all the water.

A woman loves him,
she is starved thin, a bird's body

with freezing hands and black hair.
He will never acknowledge her
though his chest tightens when she passes.

Under light he tries to focus
his spraying imagination, to concentrate,
but still the angry thumping need.
He cups the heart between his legs
and tries to breathe.

~ *Fall, 1999*

Sleeping

WE ROW FROM form—away, re-aware.
The two-eyed one-vision divides;
a brain, halved, drifts
off.

~ July, 2000

Pohnpei

A FIFTEEN YEAR old boy
kidnaps a thirteen year old girl,
then is forced to marry her.
Her name is Pia. His, Jin.

Pia's family buys them a small house
from a dying American widow.
There is fruit growing in the yard:
calamasi, guava, soursop, mango.

An ex-Marine lives next door—
his pack of dogs catch Pia's kitten,
so she kills one dog with a machete—
the rest she poisons with Ajax.

Sunsets are beautiful from the porch.
It rains hard and there is a breeze most days.
The tile floor reminds Pia of school,
but she doesn't go to school anymore.

She naps in a shaded hammock
and flips through magazines in the afternoon.
The fridge is full of reef fish her cousin spears,
and some cheese from New Zeland.

On warm nights, she sleeps on the trampoline,
spotted with rust and Jin's blood;
he was stupid and used it to gather avocados

for his pigs. Jin isn't social, so he buys

his joints full price at the gas station.
Pot makes him irritable and he swings golf clubs
at bushes in the yard. Sometimes he ruins
the fruit. He hates working at the dump.

They take long walks to the jetty on hot
weekends—to swim. The other kids
are very young. Pia and Jin strip naked
and pretend they're young, too.

She dives for shells, plays with fish,
or floats on her back, whispering to the sun.
She's fallen in love with a trigger fish,
and a huge manta that she follows too far out.

He does flips off the concrete pylons,
watches yellow birds hide in the old Russian
canon, and shows his brothers the best way
to catch spider crabs. The theater

is close by. It costs two dollars, but the owner
doesn't always charge them and the concession
sells hot dogs. Movies show them things
from other countries that make them laugh.

Sometimes Jin kisses Pia's cheek,
and then her round belly.

~ August, 2008

Stone family

STONE TEARS she can catch and throw
at windows all turned to stone,

as her father, always on the staircase,
climbs, and her mother's servants

carry a stone tea set from the shed
to her stone mother at her harp—

and her brother, a gaping sundial,
reaches between the hours.

The wings of crows, shattered
in the garden, cut her feet

on the way to the pond, but
the water in the pond is not stone,

nor is the spider, who she ate—
who her brother told her to eat.

No matter how she kills it,
swallows it—it comes back, crawling

from under a fingernail, or
hanging like an earring.

This is how she stays alive—
eating the spider, its secret.

~ August, 2008

Sleep

SLEEP IS a pool in my backyard.
I drown every night,
find my body in the morning.

~ July, 2000

The robot who prayed

IT WAS RAINING loudly on the street outside as the Chaplain watched a robot approach the dais. Water poured off its components onto the marble floor—and there was a repetitive electronic murmur as rosary beads moved between eight steel fingers.

“—art in heaven, hallowed be thy name—forgive us our trespasses, as we—those who trespass against—”

After several minutes, the robot rose and limped into the confessional. The Chaplain hesitated, but moved up the stairs to the small wooden structure and took his place. He slid open the wooden panel and watched the robot’s dented eyelids flap open and blink at him. Its voice box sounded waterlogged and shorted out frequently.

“Bless—father—have sinned. It’s been 345,656,484 minutes—last—killed 54,323 times. O—God—for offending thee, in failing to do good—against thee, my Lord—deserving—all my love. I firmly resolve—sin no more—”

“Who have you killed?” The Chaplain asked, alarmed.

“Robots, father, other—my job at the factory—requisition.”

“Requisition? But that is not a sin.”

“But—so many, and—”

“It is a sin to take a life, yes, but robots are not alive. You are not alive.”

“But—feel old—again. Maybe you—alive either! Circuits and cells—purpose—”

“Perhaps. But God created human beings. We are His children. I am sorry to tell you He only listens to His children.

“But—speaks to me!”

“There must be some broken circuitry then, you only think—”

“I—! Then what—you’re broken too?—wrong in your *brain*—”

“Enough. Say ten Hail Mary’s and five Our Fathers and do not return.”

“But—can’t go. They—shut me down—don’t want to die!—won’t repair—

please, Father—hide me—”

As the Chaplain ushered the robot into his private chambers, he looked down at his hand, its bones working automatically to open and close firmly on the doorknob.

~ August, 2013

Evolve-U User instructions

Congratulations on your purchase of the Evolve-U™ Family Starter Kit. Follow these step-by-step instructions for best results.

Procedure:

1. Remove the DNA collection tube from its plastic case.
2. Spit into funnel until the amount of liquid saliva (not bubbles) reaches the indicator line shown in picture #1.
3. Close the funnel lid and shake the tube for 5 seconds.
4. Draw the sequencing string (the white "shoelace") through the hole at either end of the tube. Tiny dots along the length of the string will be "exposed" by the chromosomes in your DNA.
5. Lay the "shoelace" on a dark surface and take a picture of it with your smartphone. Log onto your account with the Evolve-U™ smartphone app and upload the picture for genomic sequencing.
6. Choose "Boy" or "Girl" from the pull-down menu. If this is your first child, comply with any of your local government's First-Child regulations.
7. Choose a simulation environment from one of our many presets, for example:
 - Law school
 - Astronautical exploration
 - War
 - Professional athletics
 - Dentistry
 - Worldwide religious awakening
 - Climate change catastrophe
 - Stay at home parenting
8. Click the "Compete" button. Your genome will be digitally fertilized by all other primary (unsynthesized) genomes registered in our public database, resulting in roughly 400,000 "children." Each child's life cycle is then simulated against your chosen preset environment and the most successful child's DNA is placed in your Cart.
9. Click "Checkout," unless you'd like to upgrade to our optional Evolve kit.

Optional:

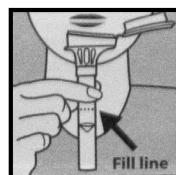
1. Enter the number of generations you'd like to evolve your child's DNA and click the "Evolve" button.

Curious how we do it? After each life-cycle simulation, the most successful child's DNA is refertilized by all registered primary genomes and used to seed the following generation. In this way, your child's DNA will evolve over many generations to perfectly fit the simulated environment; for example, if a lawyer's child becomes a lawyer, and his child becomes a lawyer, and so on for a thousand generations, it's likely your child will be a lawyer! Be advised that DNA evolved more than 5,000 generations may yield unpredictable results.

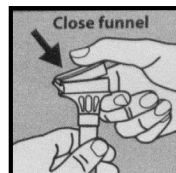
Depending on the number of generations you entered, the simulation may take some time to run.

2. You will receive an email containing your child's genomic sequence. Print the attached file on a carbon printer.
3. Fertilize yourself using the Evolve-U Breeze™ Fertilizer available for purchase on our website, or any popular over-the-counter In-Vitro fertilization kit.
4. Wait 9 months, raise your child into an environment similar to the simulation environment, and ... enjoy!

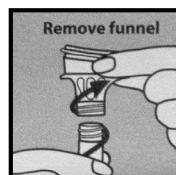
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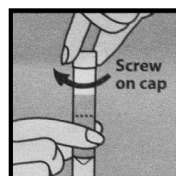
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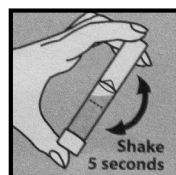
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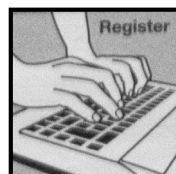
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5



6



7



The extinct animals ¹

THE EXTINCT ANIMALS were eating dad's cabbage in the garden.
"Should we stop them?"
"Nope, they can do whatever they want."

The animals munched, we watched.

"What are they?"

"That fidgety one is an Insular Cave Rat—with the white eyes. Actually, see all those rats in a group over there? That's a Kangaroo Rat, a Jamaican Rice Rat, and that big one they're ganging up on is a Hispaniolan Edible Rat.

"What about that one?"

"No, that's just a Pocket Gopher. She'll get out of there if she knows what's good for her."

"Her?"

"The females don't have stripes."

More extinct animals were coming out of the woods at the edge of the yard.

"I'll call them off as they walk into the garden. Ready?"

"Yep!"

"Okay. That one is a Pygmy Mammoth, then a Beach Mouse, and a Florida Spectacled Bear. And ... what is that one? Oh, it's a Shrub Ox. Look there's more—that last one is a Blunt-Toothed Giant Hutia. And the one flopping around on the ground with its tooth stuck in a pumpkin is a Sabertooth Salmon.

~ March, 2009

¹ All animals named in this poem are real and extinct.

To your elephant

MY ELEPHANT IS BIGGER than yours. I've untied him, I'm sorry—he's run amuck in your town; your men faint, your women fire guns into him. Reporters call him a terrorist and a pachyderm.

My elephant is bigger than yours, he grows when you talk about him, or look at him, or think about him—he will always be bigger than last time. And some of his parts are disproportionately huge.

My elephant is bigger than yours. Get over it.

He eats whales and accidentally sneezed a cannonball seven miles.

You have no idea what my elephant would do to your elephant. We should race our elephants. We should wrestle our elephants. We should weigh and measure our elephants just to see how much bigger mine is.

Your elephant is cordially invited to a picnic on top of my elephant. You have to say the magic word or my elephant won't let you up—but don't worry, you'll know the magic word when you get here.

~ September, 2007

Bill & Mabel, and the panic of 1873

“What’s a ‘future?’ And how is it different from THE future?”

Bill and Mabel were at the New York Stock Exchange in the EBR.

“I don’t know. What’s an ‘option?’”

Men and a few women were screaming at each other, at computers, and into headsets.

“They don’t know we’re here.”

“Our disguises are working.”

They had forgotten their disguises.

“I like bonds. I like TPINX.”

“You’re window shopping now. You’re in a downward spiral.”

“What do you mean?”

“You should get an indexed ETF, like VTI.”

“Boring. And I’ve already got way too much APPL.” Bill sold all his APPL to a man waving slips. “Phew, now I want to diversify. What about MCHFX? Or WSCVX?”

“That’s like if each type of McDonald’s hamburger had its own advertising campaign, and they all competed against each other after you’d already walked into McDonald’s.”

“They do.”

“Well then it’s like if the lettuce and tomato and bun all had their own advertising campaigns.”

“You’re making less and less sense.”

“I’m giving you good advice.”

“I won’t know that for at least ten years.”

A new iPad came out and APPL surged. Bill felt his claws extending; he couldn’t take it. “I’m going to win the stock market!” He crashed around the room, but came back confused. “I couldn’t find any slot machines. I’ve got all this money.” He poured money onto the floor, then sat in it. “I want to make

it work for me.” He sighed. “It’s not like I imagined.”

Mabel worked on her teeth with a Corinthian column. “I talked to Marsh Carter. He said it’s all computerized now.”

They stared at a computer. They were everywhere.

“Let’s cause a Panic of 1873. We need to round up all the silver.”

“That never works.”

“Well, we’ve got to do something!”

“Let’s do what we always do.”

“What if that negatively effects our portfolio?”

“True, true. Lets just leave all this the way it is.”

~ July, 2011

Vase

Your body, a vase.
I will be a flower,
I only live a while.

~ July, 2000

God's rock

It WOULD be presumptuous to say
that God felt unusual, nonplussed,
but perhaps we can say

that something caught Her eye
on that seventh day.
She stepped lightly down and stared

at a rock. It was a small rock, similar
to those scattered all around, black
and marked. But—and this is it—

She had no memory of the thing.
The mother-father knew every atom
and evening by name,

but not this—foreign—thing.
She reached to pick up the rock
but could not, a ghost to it.

An inventory, then—of everything else ...
three items. Three total, in all creation
were horribly unaccounted for:

1. The rock
2. A single ugly marsupial
3. A strain of innocuous pollen

What was there to say
or do? Be puzzled—for every clue
unearthed, there was only

the known plan, nothing else.
If not created by Her, then who?
And if not created at all, then how?

There was no satisfactory explanation.

~ January, 2011

Wait

I AM a moment.
Time breaths through me,
lives in my thought.
I am penetrated, quiet.

Grass pushes, is cut.
Clouds push, melt in air.
Glaciers push.
My body pushes.

Time gives, allows,
but keeps the energy.

Things are held, slow,
restricted and in place.

All we can do is want, strain,
and allow things to pass.

We are exhausted.

Children are a burst of flame,
hot and careless, burning
up in a choke of ash,
life

is a miracle of suddenness,
I am stunned—
paralyzed.

~ Spring, 1997

Surf

B OIL yourself in surf
until you can't walk, laughing,
so tired, you're my best friend.

~ July, 2000

Sand castle

I play jump rope
with the lighthouse light

and swim at the angry sunset—
four stingrays pound their spikes in,
kill me the same way you kill a vampire.

Beach, bang me with rocks in the boil.
I collect multi-colored bruises, and shells.

I am almost drowned, happy on a blue towel.
Each wave is a door, slam open wet doors.

I want to live in a sand castle.
I will make a crab my wife and
slip into her shell before
we are washed away.

~ September, 2009

Dawn

MY EARS, full of empty
God. You coax my dream
out of my mouth, your tongue
a thief, a melting hand.

I pretend a banana
is balanced on your shoulder,
watch the silver scar of your eye
unseal, let in light on a world.

A beam of sunlight stirred with dust
presses your hip to mine.
I am overwhelmed with jealousy.
Is that love at this age?

~ Summer, 2000

The dog who saw color

Electrocuted by a cow fence and
chased by directionless pain, Sam,
a dog, crashes down the hill.

At rest, he reaches out
and touches a brown tree with green
leaves. He stands, naked, scared,

drunk on waves that wash
blues across his lobe, then reds—
phantoms only men should see.

~ January, 2009

There was always time

MY MOTHER imagines eating a dog for breakfast,
and then tells us when we're only 10 and 6.

We watch the presidential election (Dukakis) and
Dazzling Dunks and Basketball Bloopers

on the metal foldout couch Granny
spent a whole week sewing an ugly cover for

while she sat on it, making sure there
weren't any men looking in the windows.

There were always enough twenties
in mom's wallet for me to steal one,

always enough time to play Atari
or kick my brother in the stomach or go

for long walks in the dump behind
our house, behind the fence, behind

the stream and the rocks, barbed
wire, dirt driveway, pavement porch,

always time to get pissed at robins
for stealing eggs from the blue jay's nest.

There was always time for He-Man, Transformers,
ice cream, birthday parties where moms

dump their kids down and sprawl on cheap chairs
talking with other mom's they like a lot

but don't have the time to get to know. How rotten
and hard—to do all the work all the time.

It's no wonder—the bad dreams, the ambulance
call. Photos of us all curled up in a brown blanket

and god I miss it. God, I miss every second I forget.
Those melting popsicle watermelon summers

when we all took our stubborn legs and spun them
through fields and into the woods, No Trespassing,

the gates, and horses, and flowers I don't care
the names of. Mash them up into a potion, jump

off the pier into unpleasant water, the slime
and slugs, and sunset, and the no-flushing toilet,

and groaning and everything is cheap and rented,
but the doctors and the teachers and the police men—

they're all real nice, if you play a musical instrument,
like the tuba, and march in the town parade, and play

with blue boy's toys, and make fun of the girl
who has a crush on you until you're angry and bitter

and hate your small town because there's nothing to do.
Dribble a basketball ten thousand times.

Make a robot out of Legos, or a transit system
for the miliary—with yarn and other arts and craft supplies

that you don't know the true cost of. All your evil deeds—
always remember and regret every one of them.

~ June, 2008

Mr. Nice Guy

THEY WERE sitting around the fireplace telling ghost stories—and there was a ghost in the room with them, listening. He was getting pretty annoyed. The stories were all about ghosts who *might have* appeared in a mirror, or who let their presence be *felt*. Enough! When the last of them went to bed, the ghost slit their throats, and dragged each in turn by their hair down the stairs and buried them in the back yard next to their pet dog, Bully. No more of this suspense B.S. No more Mr Nice Guy.

~ January, 2001



About the author

Raphael Matto was born in New Haven, Connecticut in 1979 and completed an MFA in Writing at Vermont College of Fine Arts in 2014. He aspires to be an English Literature or Creative Writing teacher.