

Fused Realities



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Script For A Reading Of Poetry And Prose.

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Water Melts Sugar

Water melts sugar. Sunlight
in February melts the dull fog
on the bald canal. We are
dissolved, standing on the bank
searching the dark water for gar.
They drift away.

Fog dulls the hearing. There –
is that dog barking ahead of us
or behind? No matter, we have
no need of dogs now, or fish.
We have everything.

You know, sugar is good in our coffee
and on berries when the summer comes.
And look – I think I see one
swimming in the swift, cold deep.

Digging Up Words

I have a terrible need to find words,
to hunt them out from underground
with the help of a good cadaver dog,
to root them up from their caverns
and tombs and stack them -
femur, backbone, ribcage, skull -
into the body of this passing day.

Tomorrow I could build another form;
Tuesday another, and on and on.
One day, I would build a thing that speaks:
I want nothing from you, nothing more...
Bodies enough for the rest of my life,
all hung on wires through the knobby spine
like tattered coats. All swinging
in a gentle breeze, all turning
then to watch me walk away.

Toast

At breakfast time I make coffee
and toast. A slice
for me and one for the dog.
I have a mug with a red barn on it,
the radio plays pianos and guitars.

I break her slice into pieces
the size of my thumb. Her long
whiskers brush my hand
as she takes each bite, then watches
the plate and watches me.

If I hesitate, her eyes grow wet and bright
with the grief of unbearable joy.

I like her whiskers long and wild.
She needs them in the undergrowth,
to shield her face from the rough guava
and lilac, to find the trail the cat has left.

One slice is enough for us.
We have the music
and we keep the pieces small.

Footsteps

Have you ever noticed how,
in certain wooden houses,
footsteps on the boards
overhead sound like heartbeats?

There is as much absence
in the sound as presence
as much loss as gain
as though despite its own
evidence it may prove my
solitude.

But I don't want to be alone.
Never truly alone in this world.
Don't leave me. Tell me
who will care in thirty
years or forty to lift my chin
and say look -- a bird.

Last night, we had wind
and the dog barked, made
the house nervous. But we
all stayed in bed, waiting
for the breeze to die.
Then we heard footsteps.

Finding Oakland

“because here we were dealing with the
pit and prune juice of poor beat life itself
in the god awful streets of man.”

Kerouac

In my heart, I have come back to
San Francisco, which sprang up
on the edge like a condemned man's
last meal, where patience and action
are futile. I have come to kneel
where only prayer is valid.

In the Steinhart Aquarium, my brother
longed to swim in the cool peace.
In a dream I saw him on the BART,
plunge beneath the bay, searching
for water. But he rose up,
finding Oakland. He stepped
from the train, saying “we are
like men who have lost their legs.”

In a dream I saw him walking
south on Mission Street, turning
into an alley and a dark pawnshop.
Like poor Raskolnikov, the price
was just too high. The fog
lingered about the hills, anointing
the housetops, hanging from street lights.

Then Jesus rose up through the steam
in the street, parting the traffic,
leveling light on everything.
Dragging the curtain torn in two.
An army of angels marched
down from Bolinas,
swinging the broken chains.

Blue Flowers

We are driven to the desert
father; sage and red gravel.
Our backs to the ocean, sounds
of locust and snake.

After days and nights of shoes
crunching on basalt and throb
of blood in our ears, we can
see mountains of blue flowers.

After the crossing, men lost
in the village, homes and fathers
left behind, children shuffling
in the heat and flies,

after the mud in dry places,
the cries of the dying and the news
reports, the dust of us will
feed the flowers by the tracks.

Father, I will water your lilacs
again, and I will sing from the rocks
on your grave; my voice above
the laughing of the wind.

Shining Leaves

1

He always has a hard time facing his complicity with the world when things go wrong. It's not his fault, being mostly just caught up and swept along. He gets out of bed and opens the blinds. The sun is up and he sees the window is dirty and spattered, giving him a sadly marred view of the old clothesline, the broken concrete patio, the budding plum tree. Any other day, he would deny his part in all this. Not his fault that God insists on driving the rain at an angle to the glass, nor that the man who used to come and wash the windows died last year on a cot in the YMCA. But just at that moment of dawning denial, he remembers the day.

It is Saturday, and it is his birthday. And it is his custom, on this one day every year, to admit that he is, after all, the one guy who is always around when things start going bad. Other people are around for some of it, and some are there for most of it, but when it comes right down to it, he is the greatest common denominator. He blinks through the grime and thinks of the Windex under the sink, and the paper towels hanging there.

What he really wants is to sit on the edge of the bed for two hours or three, watching CNN Headline News, to see if he can spot variations in the reports from one half hour to the next. He always hopes that it will change, that he hasn't already missed everything that is going to happen. But since it is a special day, he needs to get moving.

He eats oatmeal with honey and raisins, listening to a country station. Hears a song about a long haul trucker whose wife died home alone, while he pulled a long load of pipe through a cold Georgia rain. All the trucker had left was a photo in his wallet and the cat they found together at the shelter, who dozed in the sleeper while he drove and drove, trying to outrun his grief. Despite the comfort of oatmeal and coffee, he thinks he can relate.

With his face shaved, belly full and shoes tied tight, he feels damn near heroic. Fit to go forth and stand fast to the winds of personal responsibility. On the hall table, he finds his paycheck. He bends and rubs the dog's ears and head, reassures her of his swift return, and goes out. And behind him there is commitment in the sound of the lock.

2

His dog wakes up. She gets to her feet in the space between the couch and the coffee table, where she feels safe when she is alone, and goes to the center of the room. She stands a moment to get her bearings.

It is day. The man is gone. I can smell him not here.

The sliding glass door is open just enough for her to go out and no more. There is a broom handle in the track at its foot.

Across the patio, between the potted bromeliads to the grass. She pees. Back on the patio, she drinks from her dish, turns around three times and lays down on her Astroturf mat.

The world is made of grass and birds, things to eat, and everything is full of sound. It all smells wonderful. There is the fence, and everything beyond it is suspect, a threat. It must be warned to stay away.

I like the park. I watch the birds and growl at other dogs.

For my food, I give the man a great and happy yelp.

A cloud moves across the sun and it grows cold in the place where she lies. From the barbecue she smells the meat that was cooked there last week.

When I was little there were toys and a ball. I went around with the ball in my mouth. I could run from the beach to the trees! Now I have water and food twice a day. I walk between the places where I sleep.

She rises and decides to go inside, back to her place by the couch. She stands and barks her loudest bark, just to hear her voice from the metal garden shed bounce back to her.

3

A small dark cloud moves across the face of the sun. He notices the dimming as he stands in line at the bank. A potted red begonia in a bright brass pot beside a desk, deep green and reflecting long fluorescent lights. His mother had begonias, roses, mums. She watered them and sang

I come to the garden alone
while the dew is still on the roses

She might have said these leaves have been polished for hours by an angel with a can of wax. His mother believed in angels, loved to cook. He thinks about corn and buttered baked potatoes, until it is his turn.

He hands his deposit slip and check to the teller. They both say good morning and she turns to her computer. That's when the cloud moves on and lets the sun come out. He notices her hands as she types and lifts a receipt from a stack of blanks.

If he shaved very carefully, her hands would feel wonderful on his face. He looks away before she catches him staring. A young man with a red tie comes out of the vault.

It's been forever since a woman touched my ears, he thinks.

She would be offended by his thoughts.

If I die on the road home, she'd never know. But if she knew I think her hands are beautiful, she would hate me 'til I die.

The clock in the tower of the school is five minutes slow. What a shame, he thinks, that no one cares. And another cloud is filtering the light, so that all along the gray-black streets the leaves are shining with yesterday's rain.

People

Some of us suffer terribly,
the grass a sea of needles,
the birds singing in bitter cries
that break our hearts;
the floors unstable, the chairs
brittle and hard, their dead
wood unlovable and lost.

Some of us are singing
happily into death or into
afternoons with children
naming the shapes of clouds
that lead the shadows of force
off the sea. There is tea
in the evening and the windows
shine the inner spaces back to us.

Some of us are looking for answers,
good and evil and the best road
home, and where to stop
for the night with a dog.
Then at the end, will God still love
us if we're spent?

Some of us can jump, dance, melt
the snow with our bodies, call down
the rain for something to laugh at,
restless in the hastening wind
or in a night without wine, spending
the hours with our ghosts.

Some of us find ourselves
in little cups left here and there
about the house, cups
chipped and faded by washing,
stained by the joy of our parents.
We hear their voices all night
in the breeze over the shingles
and in the chimney, all night.

Out Walking

Maybe some night, moonless
and cold like this, you're out
walking, a final small breath
from the trees, the hills and clouds
invisible, and the dark opens up
in front of you. A curtain thrown
back joyfully, and there where
nothing was but grass
is a room; a kitchen containing
every sunrise of your life.

The soul is pure luminescence,
birdsong, mourning and grief
for this silence, this poetry
of solitude, this pen with black ink.

The Good Story

He always tried to be a good story. Through the years, as paragraphs drifted by and settled on his shoulders, he offered no protest. As the wind has gathered words against curbs and gutters, against chain link and picket fences, caught in the weeds that persevere, he simply put them in his pockets, moving on. He is a work of small phrases but that has been his job, to collect these little things and keep them cleared away. He has done it carefully, without complaint. But to take up all of it was just impossible; so much was left behind. It's not his fault. He's just one simple story, after all.

It started well enough, and happily, though he was born on a day when it clouded suddenly, rained and stayed dark, and everyone said it was much too late in the year for that sort of weather. They said the ocean seemed to be thinking about something, deeply. And that maybe someone would go out for abalone, dive down and be caught in one of those thickening blue-black thoughts, and not come home. It was that kind of day. The divers saw it and stood on the dock for a long time drinking coffee and shielding their eyes with their free hands, watching the ocean think about death. Then they put their gear away and tossed the dregs of their coffee into the water and went home.

Looking back on it now, he sees they must have known that he was born that day, that he was probably the context, if not the point of view, of all that earnest brooding air. So he's been held to blame. *Post hoc ergo propter hoc*.

As a child, he learned to put small things together, line them up. Subject, object, verb. And it was all predicated on time, which he saw laid out before him in great galleys, on a table in the morning sun. He wandered here and there through phrases of melody, past periods when everything seemed to stop. And taking a breath, he would rise and fall again. He was a child on a slide that stood shining in damp grass – the sun was barely even up! – and anything was possible if he followed rules, dropped nothing that was given him to hold or let it

break away too soon. That's not so much responsibility.

The problem comes with wanting to grow, to take on more of self and life, to be an important story of substance, tinted with green flecks of meaning that glitter across the room. He wanted to be a work like that, a tale to turn heads, drive conversation at parties, be mentioned more than now and then. "Yes, but you really must read ..." and they would know his name. So he grew, and took on height beyond a single page of pretense and prefigurement.

As he grew, he took on heaviness and years. He had to slow down from a dance to a trot, then to a less readable jog. Before he learned he had to walk – and that the only way to make it through, to find a happy way to end, was to lean back in a comfy chair and take his time about it all – a worse thing happened.

His voice changed. Just a little. You probably wouldn't have noticed. He didn't reveal his narrator, or anything so bad as that. But he found his vowels creaking now and then, and when he stood and tried to speak, what rattled out was tinged with grief.

He had learned to pick up bits of memory, and use them here and there to start a scene. This is something stories do. It can't be helped, since future tense is conjectural at best.

So he turned one late spring windy afternoon and went to see his grandfather, who had been a long novella about work and holidays and dogs. Grandpa had been built on backstory himself, so he had so much good advice to give: Keep your lines clean and sharp, stand up straight, and always leave them wanting more. And one last thing, boy. Tell the truth.

It helped. It really helped a while, I think. He tried to go on living well. One word after another, that's the key to happiness. And if you block, just say the next right thing. But all that doesn't pay the bills, not in a town this small, not for the long and heavy haul, not on page two of any life that drifts through drafts like this. Sooner or later, everybody makes stuff up.

Like the time he met the unformed ghost of no one in particular, which rose up from a warped and dusty hardwood floor and came at him, and moaned. And how he screamed and hit the screen door at a run, and fell out into the yard. The house stood like a dull and dying thing made of trees in the August heat and laughed at him. A story should be more fun than that, and brave enough to stand and face the unseen world in which it lives. I know that you agree.

He wanted peace. He grew weary of page after page of getting up and eating life, then lying down. He knew what everyone thought about him, that he was the story of a rainy day and the pensive sea and how the men could have died, their bodies swept away, dissolved, digested by the churning engine of the world. He knew it was useless to change the subject after all, that it was carved on his synopsis, and it would mark his grave in fading ink.

One day he got up late, after all the writers were gone for espresso and scones, and their computers were idling with screensavers of lost and knotted pipes. He climbed to the top of the hill; the hill that is bald on the top, weedless, a scorched and freckled pate of rock. He stood and looked down on the harmless, mostly useless town. There were no factories, no feedlot, no winery or mill. *What do those people do all day?* Just the houses and the school where he started, waiting in line to climb the slide.

I am not a story of the sea, he roared, and the birds scattered from the trees below and all around. *I am not a tale of sad weather, not anymore. I am a story of children at a carnival, with a teacup ride and a Ferris wheel. I can tell you about cotton candy and getting sick in the grass, and ring toss games that aren't quite fair. I know about going from ride to ride with your father, and him buying your ticket for the carousel. I have seen his face grow bright and brighter, every time you come around. And what about the dogs? I could be a story, damn you all, about dogs and how they eat and sleep and play. I could show you a little dog, running in a dream.*

We know that that's not going to happen. We knew from the second paragraph how things would all turn out for him. No easy death, no publishable adventure, no bright turn of phrase to give the reader hope. He's not that kind of guy. We read near

the end of the story Rust Abides. He doesn't understand the phrase, but feels persistent truth in it, a sense of doom, an unremitting entropy.

We writers have a place for things like him. It's not an envelope addressed to the big city. Why pay for the postage, just to buy rejection slips? It's certainly not the wicker waste can by the desk. He's maybe just a shade too good for that, with all he's learned and all he's suffered stoically. He understands what happens now, and you can help by stepping back. Just watch, as he stands and brushes the crumbs of consonants from the front of his shirt and from his jeans, and slips himself quietly into the drawer.

Sleepy Little Dog

I begin to write: the little dog
is sleeping by the door, breathing
the sour dampness of the yard,
her paws moving slightly, dreaming
of rabbits and the taste of grass....

I have come to know this pen,
the weight of it, the point
which must be turned just so.
The cheap gold pitted
by the sweat of my hands.

My pen is hard and cold;
with it, I can write only words.
Your voice and even least
amazing smile are lost
to the physics of thought.

The ink I use is black.
I used all the blue for failing at love.
I thought love was soft color,
carousel horses and a rainy day.
But maybe it's arc light and violence,
a tiger and a spray of blood.

So I was wrong, and this old
pen is useless, dead
without the rhythm of your step
and the flight of your hands.
But now it's all I have, because
the dog has drifted off to sleep.

Patience

Waiting for my life
to begin again,
for the dead clock to run
backwards to my birth,
for the dawn to bend
humbly over Carpinteria,
San Francisco, Death Valley;
wherever I am when it finally
happens:

when sugar of the orange
runs back to the tree,
airships float whispering
through my suffering sky,
the blue dog of mystery
meets me on the other side,
my scars fade to roses
and cities are built on my bones.

Restless

I should stand up
and move about the house
looking for words.
I could, and leave you here
among the books,
but I know I would find
as always, clock, glass, rag,
wood, window, hot night
glowing with trouble.
Oh, that one is new.

I ought to remain, alone,
drinking water, worried
about weather, street, darkness,
madness, fuel,
because in moving,
stirring air, shifting light,
waking shadow,
I might never find peace.

A Good Blanket

*It's just love lingering
in a gray day alone.
Just love, or the pull of the wind
to where it goes beyond the hill.*

He sits at the kitchen table with both hands flat, palms down, letting his fingers slip in and out of the grooves routed in its cool oak surface. He stares for a time down over the yard to the pond. It is morning but hard to tell how early. He feels like he'd already been up a long time since he came in from the barn, hours before first light. But the sky is overcast, a gray dome of diffused indifferent glare. There is just a little wind.

The clock above the stove says not yet eight, and he knows that she would not like to proceed in such weather, but the task cannot be put aside. He is burning daylight. Clouds or no, the day is getting warmer, and the heat of day can only bring more misery.

In the barn, he goes first to her stall and looks down where she lies on her side in the hay. Her head is covered with an old Navajo blanket, but he knows her eyes are closed because he closed them. He has folded her legs and curved her neck to make her body more compact, and she looks like a deer curled, sleeping in the hay. This he did with soft old ropes in the dead of night, by lantern light, before stiffness made the task impossible. Her tongue is a little out between her teeth, because there was nothing he could do about that. But her coat is russet and shining in the light from the doors. He thinks about brushing her one more time, but she is truly through with such things.

He considers calling a neighbor, so maybe he can get some help. *No. All I have to do is this, then that. The next right thing. Like words in their order, or how you tie a knot. Step by step until I get it done. It's mine to do and mine alone. Not every man has fallow land and half a day to spend on death, let alone kindness.*

He uses the sling, the block and tackle, and in an hour has her up and swung out to the center of the barn, laid gently on a tarp. This he folds over her, wraps her well and binds her around with rope. Then backs the front-loader through the doors and chains it to the load. And so they go, old man on the tractor, horse in her great canvas blanket. Down over the yard, past the pond and up the hill. The sun brakes through slowly as he uses the machine to make the hole, pauses to remove his cap and wipe the sweat from his head with a rag.

He knows it's over. Of course it is. His mother raised no fools, and he has reached his time. He will lease out all his land, all but his house and yard, and just to the far side of the hill. He will wash his coveralls and a blue check snapbutton shirt, shave and go to town. He will go to the pound, where they keep the animals lost of their homes and nameless in the world. He will choose a little dog, one that won't eat much or take after the jays where they come to wash their food, in the bath he made for them of

fenceposts and hubcaps in the shade.

He thinks of this, climbing down from the tractor where he's backed it into the shed. Sore and exhausted from burying the horse, he walks out into the hot sun, smelling the dirt he knocks from his clothes with his gloves. It matters what you name an animal. The horse was Cinnamon for her color, and for his memories of his mother's baking. He called the horse Cindy sometimes. He will choose a dog and pick it up, and the name will be there in its eyes.

Cinnamon never flinched from work in hard weather or rough ground, but was always there for him, supporting him. She heard him carefully when he spoke and stepped carefully so he wouldn't fall. When they were together, the path was clear. So he has buried her carefully, soberly. He holds the gift of her memory like something sacred, a long bone of spun glass, a window into the peace he needs just to fall asleep and rise again with daylight. But now that the horse is dead, he will be too much alone.

Tomorrow, he will have breakfast, put on his good hat – the one with no sweat stains showing through – and drive to town. He will pay the shelter what they need for trying to keep love alive, despite the cold indifference that drives it out from bleak houses, to wander hungry and nameless. But tonight he takes a long shower with strong soap. And as the hot water un-knots the muscles in his back, he lets himself cry for the horse. She deserves it, for not bucking at the sight of snakes, for carrying him and a calf as well sometimes, for letting him talk about life and sing about pain.

There is just a little wind. It comes from the east, from the hill and over the pond. It is morning again, and again his time to notice small things. To begin something like life, so that light and time are not wasted. He stands in the kitchen, eating sliced cantaloupe from a plastic bag. His coffee mug is from the Grand Canyon, a gift from his brother's grandson. *Ditat Deus*, it says: God Enriches.

And so He does. Sweet fruit from his refrigerator. Hot coffee with powdered creamer. A good hill for burying his animals. He is afraid to get a dog and bury it beside the horse, who already isn't alone up there. But he will. The dog is waiting, and the man will choose the oldest there, the most urgently in need, in God's time, of a good blanket.

Salt

What we remember
is cold, afraid to leave the bed
while the room is ticking over
like an engine shivering
in thin and blue-black air.

What we remember
is hungry, reading
the morning paper,
waiting to be lifted
by coffee out of death.
And maybe there is bread.

The crows have slept
all night on the crossarm
between the milkglass knobs
in love with nothing.

What we remember
is waiting - a dog
with one blue eye,
in the frigid morning,
cotton stalks looped
with ice, and no wind.

What we remember
is praying, sleepless
all night in the kitchen
chair, drawing worries
with her fingers in
the fine spilt salt.

The crows are finally
awake and gone. The field
is rising from its fog.

Something About Mercy

We can hear him coming, shoes crunching
on the hardpack and sparse gravel. And just
above the push and pull of his breathing,
the thin and urgent whisper of a prayer.
Something about mercy, but nothing
to explain his coming through the juniper
green and pale gray chaparral.
Just out for a walk, to clear his mind.

He will not stop to talk, but looks
at the stones ahead of him, at the sky
gone to dishwater in the afternoon,
then away at the boats where they move
to their moorings for another night
with no rain or wind. For a moment,
everything is quiet here and quickly fading.
A great blue heron sails for home.
A woman walks a massive dog.

Our man can't be worried for Rottweilers,
or fear the train that rises up and lunges,
bleating, from the darkening grove of cypress,
and pounds away behind a hill.
He has his own concerns.
Some people, even in his love for them,
seem bent on pain. He tries to warn them,
but they just won't hear.
So he has a worried mind for life itself,
for all the cracking crystal bones of it.

He is alone, except for you and me
and the trees, and the last of the sun.
A sliver of hot coal, fused to the sky
beyond the islands and the sea.
Do you see what he's doing?
Holding on to all of this, time and place,
to even the rose and saffron dying
in the highest clouds, and all the trees
that fade to charcoal gray.
He holds it all together with his prayers.

At home, he climbs the stairs and listens
to his breathing, step by step. The last cry
of the train has faded now, and everything

is turning toward its end.
The daily round come round again,
and nothing to be done for it but hope.
It leaves him spent and drained, as though
he needed emptying for night to come.
He locks the door behind him, kicks off
his shoes against the baseboard by the rug,
and goes from room to room to light the lights.

Why does it always have to end this way?
He counts his footsteps up and down the hall,
and puts a pot of water on for tea.
He has a hundred books he ought to read,
and concertos for the violin.
If you asked the number of his clocks,
he'd simply shrug and look away.

He does not believe in ghosts, but he
believes in memory. Grandpa comes in
leaning on crutches, after the news
has all been read, to check the locks
and dim the lights. Grandma layers blankets
on the beds. In every room a dog
is keeping watch. They do not speak
or make a sound, though some nights
he thinks he hears an old dog sigh.
His memory has a gift for mimicking the wind.

Lying awake, he thinks of their house
in the long valley, and Christmas, and the fog
that would come before morning.
By dawn the trees would be submerged,
and all the neighbors' homes were sunken,
gone to God. He loved those mornings,
lost at sea, with scrambled eggs
and Papa with his newspapers.
By noon the sea would melt, give up her dead.

Now he just keeps still and tries to sleep,
and listens to the gently settling house.

The birds wake up at six o'clock;
they're cheeping in the myrtle hedge.
It's warm enough this time of year
to make them glad. He sleeps
a little more, and dreams of organizing shadows
into words, then chasing them in panic

through a book. At eight o'clock he eats two eggs, then shaves and drives to town.

He always signals turns, as if nothing changes course without a plan. Nothing veers away and winds up lost, not if he holds so tightly to the wheel. And watches how the light comes smoothly through the glass, not broken into facets as in a world of quartz. Such great responsibility, holding on to everything with tired hands. Lord have mercy, it is all so much and gone so fast. He whispers this prayer for more time, another chance, and a firm grip so that all of this will live.

Sweaters

I like baggy sweaters and sweatshirts.
Cableknit from Ireland, they're good
for nights when the air is calm but cold.

The air is calm but cold.
The lights of the oil rigs
and a tanker near the islands
stand still in the dark.

Still in the dark closet, my cotton
sweatshirts hang with dead sleeves;
tight cloth won't let the air through.

I won't let the air through.
Tonight I need to be
inside and silent, so
let the old piano stand.

The piano stands across from the closet.
Irish sweaters and the ties I never wear.
My clothes from today are a heap in the chair.

I am a heap in the chair, reading
the wall street news and wishing
I had an unencumbered life, waking
in a forest of xenias with brighter eyes.

Beyond the forest and the brighter sky , the oil
tankers come with their growling and the
temperature drops. I am warmly dressed.

Time

When I'm alone, I listen to water.
My brother sleeps.
My dog sleeps. I am alone.
The moon is full, and the sky
is full of sleeping jets. I'm here
by myself, beloved, alone.
Time is running out. I sit
on the bed, alone, waiting.
It will come for me. Time will
not forget me, leave me.
It waits behind the door
until I'm alone. It sleeps
in the sink. Tick-tock,
it drips all night. Time hides
in shadows through the dappled
afternoon, sleeps and stretches
like a cat. I smell it in exhaust,
in fruit cut yesterday,
in my shampoo. I wait
by myself for time to emerge
from my dusty luggage, from
folded sheets, from long blades
of exhausted grass.

Vapor Trails

1.

Harvest moon tonight.
It will be cooler, and grow
cooler still as each night
falls away.
I live upstairs you know,
so standing by the silent
piano I can see the vapor
trails curved and stretched
among the clouds, bound
for San Francisco.
Even at night, the moon
will catch them, bring
them down for me.
The dog doesn't mind
a contrail in the house;
the ghost of a journey
not our own.
She sleeps.

2.

I could make supper
and watch TV. Or stand
in the center of the room
and kill the lights, bend
the darkness around me
like a coat, an iron
maiden of my loneliness,
my unmusical, unhappy
self. The dog shifts
to a new plot of carpet;
fresh ground for her dreaming.

3.

It is all well. The crows
are down in orchards
to the east, their vespers
done. I made spaghetti
and watched the evening news.
We learn so little of each
other, even if God gives us
months. So you've returned
our coarse, untangled
distance, and my bathroom
drawers. The dog
wakes up, and looks around
for you.

A Shadow Of Himself

As a well spent day brings happy sleep,
so life well used brings happy death.
- Leonardo da Vinci

When his things are packed and he has buckled the straps on the suitcase, closed the windows and shut off the breakers to the kitchen and the water heater, he takes his soft brown coat from where it hangs on a hook and closes the door behind him.

It is cold. A dense ocean fog drips from the buildings and trees. It is heavy with salt and smells of tide pool, kelp and wet sand. He takes a deep breath and smiles. *This, he thinks, is exactly how I want to remember this place. As if the ocean isn't satisfied to lie there beyond the field, beyond the cypress trees. It stands up and leaves its bed and comes ashore; it wants to have the sky's place too.*

He locks the door, he takes up the suitcase from where he had set it on the porch. Like him it is old, made of leather, and stretches and creaks with the weight of its contents.

Or maybe that's not right at all, that the sea has come up here. Maybe the hill, my house, the trees, are all under water now. Maybe it all slipped beneath the waves while I slept and never did wake up. The air is really just that wet and heavy, almost hard to breathe. In which case, it's good that I'm leaving today. It's not right for a man to live submerged.

He has lived here a long time; forty, maybe fifty years. It was a good house, set on a little hill. But he rarely felt entirely at home. He was a troubled, uneasy guest in this place. He always felt that something stirred beyond the trees, which knew his name and knew that he did not belong. He got old and learned to dread the steps to the porch and fear the steep path to the beach. And there was such weather that on many long dark nights, he feared the wind might blow his house and everything away.

How could any of that matter now? Why stand on the concrete walk, between the dripping yew trees, beside the iron birdbath full of nothing but a coat of rust, and not at least try to be happy with his memories? There were hours, even days, passed in aching happiness. There were dogs to play with, and a woman with a red guitar. Brown hair – the faintest wisps of it – lifted toward the hills by a breeze off the sea. And leaving cannot take those memories away.

The house will belong to others now. He did not build it, did not dig the well or plant the trees. He added just some coats of paint, a roof or two, and a painting for the wall above the bed: A man in blue with several dogs, holding a book. It's wistful. He has left it behind for the new people. Maybe it will help them sleep.

He has just one regret, that he spent his years here, raking the dry inedible figs from the threadbare grass of his yard, and dreading a moment he heard his father speak of long ago.

"Every man," his father said, "will reach a moment in his life when he is the best man he will ever be. And for that instant, he knows as much as he will ever know; he

has the most of peace and freedom he will ever have.” And now, carrying the last of his belongings past the mailbox, through the gate, he sees what his father failed to warn him of: that the moment would come and go unrecognized except in the years that followed it. So although it came and passed and flicked away, he did not cease in dreading it, even as all his will and insight flagged.

He has an hour to himself, until the train. Then he will be gone from here forever. Whether he goes far or not doesn't matter. The decision and departure in itself is everything, and more important than the miles or the time required for travel. There is a point of no return, just beyond that curve of coast, where the tracks rise to climb a hill and disappear around the bend.

Does he seem fatalistic? Well. He hasn't always been that way. There used to be abundant hope. He planted a garden from seeds every summer. He picked vegetables and fruit enough to share. If there hadn't been trees to give him shade, he might have planted those as well. He often used to chuckle at a sign in the local bar: Free Beer Tomorrow. And why not? As each day ends and the sun sets to give the undersides of clouds their share of light, another day is promised, isn't it? We have a covenant of more time coming, a fair chance to get things done, get forgiveness or vengeance, or simply see another Christmas come and go. And so they do, until the last. Then someone is the last one standing. The last, who must close the door and turn, take up his bag and walk the road that all the others walked before.

Every step down the sidewalk – raised and cracked here and there by roots – every step becomes a memory, ignited where his heel strikes and racing up his back to light in his eyes. As he walks he remembers the safety he felt as a child, in that home across town that his parents made for him. He was as light as a feather on the world. He listened to the wind off the ocean and understood his future would be bright and blue. And it was, until the wind turned in his middle years as it does today, and the air grew thick. Clouds descended, darkened, and delivered a spattering rain. The future, he saw, was in the past. And then it rained – and now it rains again – most earnestly.

His earliest memory is of sleeping between his parents in their large, warm bed, in a night of fear banked against thunder and lightning; and sometime before dawn watching animals run and play as though projected onto one long wall; then later thinking he had been awake. He was a child for whom the line between dreams and waking life was often blurred, so that his dreams were vivid in his mind throughout the day.

There is a garden in the station yard, where all the departing sit and wait. He arrives early and alone, wearing his brown wool coat, which has turned the rich color of mud in the rain. There are cold stone benches to rest on, plantings of heather growing pale December red, and a memorial plaque for the dead of World War I. It is a quiet, thoughtful place, considering the street is close. Those not traveling away are going by in cars and trucks. They still live here, today, going to school and coming home, on bicycles, on foot, with umbrellas. There are dogs on leash who shake the water from their coats. He takes a last, long look at his town, enough to last his mind for a hundred miles down the track.

It is not just a matter of failure, of having tried and met, despite good effort and high character, a staunch tide that turned against his ship. It is a matter of fraud against

life, of never having gone to sea at all. There was a moment – perhaps that moment that his father warned him of – when he stood on the bluffs overlooking the pier and watched the others come and go, and knew that they were better men. He was a light to no one but himself, and now he is a shadow of the man he was; and worse, of the man he knows he could have been.

The rain has stopped. The clouds are breaking up and clearing a path for the sun to light a beautiful sunset.

He has only this case of old shirts with worn collars, folded underwear, and socks the shade of burnt charcoal. He knows they will not let him take it on the train. There is a sign: *No Baggage Past This Point*. Well, no matter. Never mind. Maybe he can be happy anyway, without his things. Couldn't you?

Charcoal. He remembers that afternoon of high summer when his nephews picked tomatoes and sliced them, and how the dog danced around the barbeque as they cooked the hamburgers and corn. And later, the boys flew kites. They were red and green and purple in the bright blue sky. And that night they sat in the kitchen, where it was cool with the tile floor and the windows open toward the ocean, and they all told stories. He told the one about Grandpa losing control of his mules in the river, and how he almost drowned under his wagon, but lived and said that he'd been saved by Grace, the very gentle hand of God.

The sun is going down. The lights in the station and the street come on. Now he stands and leaves his bag on the ground and his old coat on the bench. He wants a little more of all of it, this place where he has grown and been loved, lost everything, and found this hour of peace as the daylight fades.

He goes to the low fence between the garden and the city street. He leans on the railing and reaches out and calls to a young man walking by. He can almost touch the young man's arm. He wants to warn him about the moment, in case his own father hasn't told him, or can't or won't. Just in case.

"Listen! There is no such damnable moment! Don't believe it. No life changing, metaphorical turning of the tide. Only sunshine and rain, the consolation of prayer in the darkness, a hard wind in late winter. And maybe for a while, there is love."

But the young man doesn't hear him, cannot see him, and now the air is full of the sounds of bells and steel brakes. The train is in the station, and he has but three more steps to climb, to the platform. He is wearing a new white coat as the night comes down, and he joins the others gathered in the station where no one not departing ever stands to say goodbye.