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Otis in the Summer of Love

by Eric Zuckerman

B.A., Gonzaga University, 1993

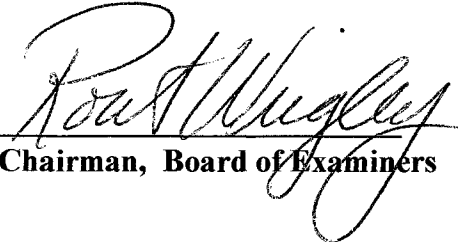
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1995

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I

Zero Night

The maitre d' says zero on the books
tonight. I send the fish cook home.
Leslie is my pastry chef and vastly skilled,

her Buche de Noels deft copies of logs,
her Sauce Anglais perfection.
We do better cooking than sleeping;

I am doing too much drinking.
Work is where we function best
just facing each other over our boards

chopping our various things. And the lulls
this patronless night are long. We strain
stocks and cool then down in buckets. We store.

And I lose myself in choosing grains
I'd lay on shelves for her, scenarios
dense with providing. Doing the spice rack

only makes it worse. And then she starts
some caramel, and I some consommé,
and the sugar browns, and the raw bones darken.

When All You Do Is Salmon

The coho lay sprawled in the sink,
head and tail curving up the sides.
I cut cleanly, blade down center-bone
with harsh clicking sounds.

The twin filets released from spine:
oil-rich, crimson. Trimmed and cut,
they bathe in marinade mostly of lime.

I trot home through the first rain
of a spring storm, aware this salmon-work
was all today I added to the world.

Scales like mica-flakes stick to my hand.
I peel them when their tiny edges curl.
At intervals throughout the day
they seem to come from nowhere,
sudden on the skin, sheer remnants
faint with sea.

Apprenticing With Jean-Luc

I can tell by the way
that the man kills eels
there is seething in Jean-Luc,
his gripping its neck
in a kitchen towel,

then whamming the face
on the lip of the sink,
over and over,

creature gaping and gasping,
blood splattered
across the breast

of Jean-Luc's starched
white coat,
 droplets
on his grimaced mouth,
beside his eye
like tattooed-jailhouse-tears.

And we apprentices,
perhaps a week
into training,
talking that evening
after the shift
over a slew of drinks,

sensing a boding edge to this man.
("He was *eerie*," shrieked Julane)

and each of us spoke
what we thought we saw
happening round that sink.

(stanza break)

But to me, his killing-style
was portent, for over the months
disturbing acts:

insistence that we maim
the crawfish, twisting
their claws while still alive
backward toward their cavities,

then jamming the pincers
into the shells
for presentation's sake,

which, according to Jean-Luc,
overrode the litany
of agonies he doled.

Absorbing Scampi

I was out of control and the customer knew it, patient
with me though, seated at the oyster bar
munching my shrimp. They were rarely compliant:
some of them badly scorched, tough or over-
cooked. I was in the dark here, truly, cooking
by instinct, which failed me. I needed help with chemistries,
internal heats. With the chef suddenly watching,
I froze. He slid beside me by the stoves
and gently took the skillet from my hand,
placed it on a full flame until it nearly
pulsed with heat, and only then began.
And his way with pause is what resonates most clearly
now: how he drowned the din, the onlookers out
of his mind, and made the interlude devout.

The Saucier

I drive to work
through the August
valley, the vineyards
at crush time,
air heavy with must,

and park
by the kitchen
door, passing
the garden of sorrel
and chives,
tarragon and thyme
clipped for sauces.

The kitchen before me
is steely and spotless,
with low-slung banks
of brutish stoves.

I change in the storeroom
amid tins of France:
walnut oil
and truffle juice
for the sweetbreads.

Bones wait in roasting pans
while the ovens heat.

I want the waitress
to see me this way,
pensive and alone,
wreathed in copper,

and I move
as if she
were watching,

(stanza break)

(The Saucier -- 2)

each expression
a measured pose,
controlled,
flawless.

She turns in her sleep
someplace in the valley,

her breast
in the curve
of her arm.

Testing For Doneness

There came a time
when I seasoned by feel,
this much pepper
for that much stock.

And more and more
while tending those simmerings,
I'd slip beneath their surfaces,
the mystery of such things

dissolving, as leek simply gave
its green, and carrot its orange.
I knew they were done by soft
awareness, sudden as lust comes,

though I poked them anyway
not quite trusting their doneness,
as if soft, spent onion, still,
in an unknown place held more.

Catching the Eye of Cary Crant

One night in chef school, during a lecture
on binding agents, they walked Cary through.
The chef was going on about texture
in soup, and the rationale for roux.

All that evening, I watched him from the stoves --
glancing as surreptitiously as I
could, studding the same two onions with cloves
over and over. I can verify

the cleft in his chin was startling,
as well as the difference in age between
he and his wife. A Hollywood king
was sampling our terrines,

and I caught his eye with the briefest grin,
though one which I'd say was not overly
fawning, a month before death took him in.
I've been known to embellish this story.

II

I Show the Cat My Body

I place a lit candle
in the corner of the tub,
the rougey flame sole light,

and ease into the bath.
I slide the shower door
to just a crack

waiting for the kitten.
Red steam rises off the water.
I lifty my leg and it steams, too,

like brisket forked from braising.
When she comes, my legs form
a bridge from entrance crack

to me. She ventures out Wallenda-
style, testing strength, then commits
nimble toward my knee. Willfully

I show her my body, which she regards,
scrotum no more scrutinized than calf.
She tends her neck down toward water

like something elfin's just beneath
the skin, and crouched low
off my thigh, she laps the liquid

vaguely me. I feel as if
my body is both
ground and God.

The Checkout Line

The ancient wife,
Slavic, babushka-wrapped
gums her thoughts
in the checkout line.

The vacant stare disappears
as her husband
playfully greets
the sultry cashier,
bags the produce for her

adding good-naturedly
how nice to see her,
her freshness, her body,
plausibly in his mind.

Something rouses in the wife.
A woman she once was
animates her stolid form

as if negligee-draped,
smoldering, she withholds
the night.

Lineage

Thai girls in native garb
working the opium,
scraping the pods
with curved blades,
the oily drug collecting
as they glean the poppy fields.

The fathers of the girls
will wrap the gum,
and send it by caravan
through Burma moon

to other fathers
who cook it in jungle vats,
the pleasure -essence
extracted, refined,

its scent wafting to the upper limbs,
where macaws shriek
as if scandalized by the brew.

The Bookstore: A Sequence of Aisles

Health & Fitness

On days my weakened liver aches
I come here first, pull out anatomy
and dwell upon hepatic function.
On days my liver's calm I go to

Cooking.

Because I did this as vocation
I take some liberty here:
browse in a slangy way,
snicker low at recipes
I deem will fail.

Sex

I thumb these volumes guardedly, even
shifting to straddle the place where Sex
becomes Travel, and view the tantric
picturebook inside an open Fodor's.
When salesgirls pass -- its merely France.
Once I found a glossy Penthouse
fammed beside a red thesaurus
way, way back in Writing Aids.

Biography

I look for those immaculate souls,
then scan the index hungrily
for scandal.

(stanza break)

Romance

Harlequin men are not permitted
any body hair at all.

Poetry

books have pictures of the poets
on the inside flap. Every so often
one appears with sultry mouth
and ravishing mane of hair.

To Shower As If Daisy Awaits

For a long spell
there's been no sex.
He senses how unwavering
the mode of his bathing's been,

careful and complete,
as if pristine Daisy
waits amid the sheets,
eager to strip him bare

and prowl lightly
by his buttocks.
"One could," he thinks,
smelling his scented forearm,
"kiss me anywhere."

Ivory slips past orifice
and leaves his body
faultless. Though nothing
in the future even glints

of liaison, still -- as if
visitation loomed --
he powders off
with scented talc
a sexual circumference.

The Fireworks Stand in Idaho

I come for explosives, pure and simple,
green money for stiff, green fuse,
eighty miles to the reservation,
clapboard stand called Rosie's.

Indian men thank me for coming
(related to Rosie, I guess)
her stacked arsenal
brimming behind her,

mythic brands of my youth:
Black Cat, Yankee Boy
in brash cartoon.

Tacked to the wall --
posters from China,
cracker-logos blown up large.

I picture the artist,
frail, wizened,
Canton garret, wok-scented air,

his boisterous art a potent shill
luring out the white teens
from Coeur d'Alene,

their wants listed out like Christmas
as Rosie lays before them
fireworks in red glassine.

I only want what's viscious:
that which alters --

cherry bombs so coveted back east
we stood in awe around Carmine's hand,
his palm moist with triumph and July

(stanza break)

(The Fireworks Stand in Idaho -- 2)

and breathless to the creek at dusk,
waterproof hiss on lazy flow
till still air rocked with charge
and dazed frogs surrendered.

Rosie, like Carmine's open hand
bears cherries. It is July

On Driving Back from Butte

our talk was sexual. I spoke of Jane,
the smoothness of her breasts as porcelain
some Gods had glazed. We ventured deeper still:
his going down on Fran in Louisville.
Thin and weak: those walls allowed
some sighing out, which transients in the Dowd
Hotel could faintly hear and mull upon.
I brought him to a frenzy with Yvonne
as I remembered her, (I heightened things
a bit -- some small untruths of nipple rings,
positions.) On and on we raconteured,
explicit, unabashed. I sense I'm lured
to do this on occasion -- purging all
my carnal past in grand processional,
aware of indiscretion here, though yet
persisting on. Such talk's a tourniquet
upon my seeping lust. We ended spent
and human from that blue ingredient.

Ex-Junkies Talking Disease on a Train

A swarthy woman stands and appeals
to the whole car for a pen. I give her one,
plucking it from breast pocket to her hand,
the interplay jolting, exchange rare
in these tubes. The look of her is hardened
and illicit: crude tattoo at the base of her thumb,
slow, loping gait as she re-seats, daring,
even welcoming encounter.

Back among her raucous friends
they talk about disease: "That hepatitis,"
she begins in thick Brooklynese,
"that new one. Your liver's *totally* fucked.
It blows up." And so on till Brighton Beach:
the ailments of syringe: endocarditis, the knot-
like abscess of someone named Therese,
T-cell counts of Little Boy, Charmayne,
and Program talk, interspersed with verbs
of AIDS.

I wondered if the blood in her
had met that one syringe,
and shamefully, whether I would get
my pen, and if she'd licked it.

On Bedford Street

The fire escape was five flights up,
the street light reached to four.
In evenings I could watch the street
unseen. Once I saw a drunken soldier

lift his blond companion's blouse
above her breasts. In Village light
he groped them as I drank wine.
Five years I watched that street

and nothing else sensational occurred.
I felt no danger, was scarred
and could look cruel. I used this,
when angling by the heroin.

And despite a family's heed
to my approach - the father
shifting to shield the child -
I cherished the coarse skin.

There was little else then:
an elevator job which paid all right,
this flat I kept on Bedford Street.
So I wore dark clothes and walked

to the wharves unbothered,
and the hoods in diners let me eat alone.
This is elixir for hard-looking men:
unrestricted passage through the sprawl.

III

Otis in the Summer of Love

(for Brown)

1. *The Car Itself*

When tedium came we had ways of coping: flinging
coins with enough speed that they stuck into the cork
ceiling, then using a small footstool in bringing
them down. We bolted for the streetfoods of New York,

closed the gate of the car with a brassy slap, and returned
with brown sacks spotted by grease. When the salesmen
self-adjusted, I practiced what I learned
from them in the lobby hall -- from five to ten

resounding pops resulting from a torso-twist.
The car itself had brass rails which we shined
with Brasso. The box and I would coexist
for codified shifts: the morning rush till nine,

lunch, and then the close. But when the callbox silenced,
the lobby bare, I'd park the car between
the floors, close the lights and lie supine in the darkness,
the only gleam -- the trailing whisps of carotene

light from adjacent cars in their shafts. It shone
through the airvent's grillwork, growing fainter as it rose
or fell in the sooty air. There was never full-blown
silence, though during the lulls it would hover close:

the only intrusion, floors below in the lobby --
the faint rasp of Gomez or Brown hacking,
Hamilton cursing the temperature of his coffee...
Sporadically, Robert the Baptist would sing,

his sweet polished voice coming from above,
increasing as the car whirred closer, then for an instant
beside me, his rendering of *Jesus-love*
diminishing like petals in descent

down the darkened shaft. There was tedium
it was true -- the monotonous laws of vertical driving --
yet its chantlike repetition held some opium
core, in convergence with the summer of love's rising.

11. Cable Day

"City isn't shit," says Gomez glumly,
swirling the ice of his scotch and milk with a spoon.
A fifth of Teachers, plastic cups, stands on a flimsy
table Fridays during close. Plates of maroon

spareribs, Saltine crackers covered with sardines
get passed. Gomez mourns for the park: of the nights
when walking home toward Harlem, he'd lie on the green
reservoir lawn, elevator pay in his pockets,

and rest for an hour undisturbed, the whiskey
he imbibed at four wearing off as he dozed.
He dismissed the sons of those who developed the industry,
none of them, he thought, in the league of their fathers:

vivid Jews with a sense for cloth and people,
Orchard Street indelible in their faces.
Their offspring, thought Gomez, seemed blander and rather dull;
where the fathers were refined, the sons were graceless.

And the drivers lounged by the battered-basement-freightdoor,
virtually all of them smoking, their cigarette
brands slowly becoming troublesome to secure,
lengthier, detoured walks in order to get

their Kools without filters, Herbert Tarytons.
Gomez used the stubby Kools, brackish
things he drew with gaping inhalations,
unperturbed though his lungs have the hue of licorice,

finding the streets a vile, harrowing place,
loving his money unashamedly:
calling it *my only friend* with a grimace,
while patting the wad in his pocket.

And as this was cable day, me and Gomez
entered the freightcar, Gomez, due to his age,
doing the driving. A ceiling panel released
becoming an opening, wide enough for an average

body to fit. I boosted myself on the footstool,
slithered through and straddled the oily roof
of the car, the task being to sop the oil
over the precious cable. Slathery cloth

around the steel, we rose within the shaft,
the pungent scent of Gomez's fuming Kools
blending with the queer air about this raft --
a trillion flecks of soot in particles,

lustrous in the distant skylight's rays
like coffee-steam within a shaft of sun.
This was the spine and we were in it, Gomez
driver, me the rider, doing this shaft-run,

parking *where we liked*, he in the gilded car
nipping from his cup, me atop the ceiling
straddling a beam. By pushing on the lever
to the right, he accelerates the rising.

111. The Intercourse Required

Gomez handled freight which was good. He dealt
with crude handtruck men, whose every tenth
word was *pussy-this* or *pussy-that*. He felt
more peaceful with this crew -- their menacing strength,

their drugs -- than he did with salesmen on the passenger side. He didn't do the silvery tongue; elaborate women closed him. It was *de rigueur* to mix with them every time the bell rung,

checking the callbox number, clearing it off with a smack of the hand, angling the Otis's floorboard level flush with the landing. The cough of a model is something which Hamilton notices,

lobbing his hoary charm toward her, the glib small-time loanshark from Harlem, flaying the de la Renta girl with balm. The smooth drivers went up front, those displaying

repartee, the skill of chameleons. The choicest ones could do that quite remarkably: pelted by tales of passenger Herbie's conquest -- his breast to breast "windshield-wiper-story" --

Hamilton kept right with him, Herbie's pursed lips kissing the air from side to side like even wipers sloshing away a rain-burst. Hamilton took the deft performance in

and let him off on 9, the image of Herbie unleashed between his wife's breasts, percolating briefly, then releasing its grip of reverie by someone else's presence at the gating.

For five days the drivers rose and descended, greeting their customers almost as prey -- as goods to be fashioned, absolved, mended. Some conferred the driver's hands with priestly

oils, Hamilton's especially, his elegant brown wrists bangled with arthritis bracelets, and the pleasing phlegm in his Raleigh-throated voice. "*Talk to me, Pappy,*" said volatile Cletus

on 12, his Rap Brown anger easy to rise,
as Hamilton drew the brass gate closed and turned
to him, the slight yellow sheen of his eyes
like old hepatitis verging on return

yet lacking the power to sicken. And Pappy'd
smoothly get them going, the pleasing scent
of his lotion causing the knot in Cletus to recede
some. Steering was done by abandonment.

And exiting at five, the shift accomplished,
he walks from the car as if stores of power
had left him, grips the rail as he lists
downstairs, and turns the knob of his shower

by heart. Gomez drains the oil from a tin
of sardines, and leaves it in a saucer for the cat.
The hippie from 9 is leaving for Woodstock this evening,
in a bruised van with cushions in the back.

IV. The Tenure of Salzman

To his credit, Salzman the owner refused.
The profits were alluring, automatic
cars need no drivers; the savings would be huge.
But Salzman had a flair for the dramatic,

was an old herring man who called the drivers
Mr. Williams, *Mr. Grey*, and sometimes rode the freight-
car out of courtesy to Gomez. Rumors
came and went: Salzman's financial state

perilously low, but Salzman never sold,
at least not yet. Though the buildings surrounding
215 one by one converted: the old
cars given buttons and sterile paneling,

Salzman stamped the doorposts with his tacit
imprimatur. The script *Otis* logo
embossed in the ceiling was exquisite
he felt, and the page he began with was Pogo

for the alligator on Benzedrine.
And Gomez at mass would remember the man,
grunting his intentions to the Nazerene
statue, its features blatantly non-Judean

unlike Salzman's. Gomez stayed, though found
the preaching oppressive. He drifted into space
seamlessly, eyes unfocusing a pull-down
kneeler, and crossed into his waning place:

of the brass standpipes gleaming in the sun,
the hand-carved hot meats, high-fat pastramis
sheathed in peppercorns, and habited nuns
whose cinctured rosaries clicked at their knees.

V. A Moment of Fashion for Mitch

Gomez slowed the massive, lumbering freightcar
smoothly, Mitch pushing his handtruck past him
onto the still-cool morning street. A seafood bar
reflected back his image in its maritime

plateglass window. He purposely watched himself
pushing along his thick-railed cart, stacked
to the crest with bolts of cloth for the bins and shelves
of Geoffery Beene. And as first sun cracked

over a building's peak, he whistled with a shrill
pierce for pedestrians to mind him, steering
between a band of suits his volatile,
bolt-packed handtruck to a sidewalk clearing.

Then one final whistle as he turned into
the green-dumpstered freight hall, and greeted the driver
who lifted them up toward Beene. "You know
there's a show on," he said to Mitch. "Hear

they got that English girl -- with the boy's haircut
and titties," he rasped, pulling the brass gate
open to a room, where models dressed by coconut
murals, and groomed for their apostolate.

On the inside cover of the Sunday
Magazine, an emerald brooch is an artichoke.
A mod, galactic Twiggy prepped for the runway,
her male designer pulling down the egg-yolk

frock over her upstretched arms, her frame --
the original waif-child's vacant
stare, as a man who goes by a single name
smooths his hand directly over the front

breast of her garment. Their mouths display
no semblance of emotion, and the act
entrances Mitch: a body being touched that way
without the show of register back.

Within earshot of the freighthall, a veteran
couturier expounds upon her beauty
in relation to the thought of Maritain.
Mitch narrowed the slits of his eyes to see

her better, eager to talk of her nakedness
to Gomez. He pushed the now-empty railcart
into the elevator, and caressed
his crotch with a brevity like art.

VI. Needlepoint

Gomez greeted clove cigarettes with laughter.
Examining them, I more or less concurred.
His pleated suits would hang like bats from the rafter
in our locker room, and in surges I preferred

these clothes to mine. The detail work would please
me by its sheer finesse and intricacy,
and as Terry on 6 undid his sleeve
to probe a vein for his fix -- icily

Gomez walked by. He mentioned not a thing
about it -- merely ambled toward the Teacher's
standing on the table, the pleasure-sting
piercing his stomach-lining dull but fierce

and the bulge of jaw-bone under his skin grinding.
He sipped like someone ruminating thievery,
and twisted the gold of his wedding ring
in a trance akin to Gethsemane.

He'd taken to admonishing me for someone
I was seeing, more of a warning really:
his finger -- stiff as the barrel of a gun --
thrusting in and out of his fist. " Sexually,

the older woman looks to sap the younger
man," he swore. She wants to get your tonic
out," he counseled. "It's a powerful hunger,
Boy." And I -- considering his edict

gamely -- thought of her, and how I knew
they knew of our trysts, Connie's and mine,
she -- the lover to Marshall on 2,
her quintessential hippie hair which came

to the small of her back, and the way she loved
me as Gomez heard hippies would: on the whim
of attraction, right there at her place on Grove
Street, with her walled tapestries candlelight dim,

her assented body arching. What shocked
Gomez most, was not her willingness with me,
but that Marshall was fully aware of the fact.
For this was allowance viewed on as folly

by the drivers -- character weakness: an able
man revengeless at such primal sharing.
Like he viewed the dope in the shadowy freighthall,
or the powders for sexual enhancing,

Gomez felt locked out. He'd probe into
our carnal act though, intrigued about details,
limits of what she'd do. And I walked him through
on one or two occasions, willing to regale

a greying man as expressively as I could:
Connie's gratuitous gift behind the blinds,
and the way she repeated that she would --
like the first cache the truffle-boy finds

VII. Patina

On Saturdays I did the shift alone,
polishing brass, sweeping out the stairwell.
There was time to paint the massive, weather-blown
freight-door grey. The sidewalk reeked from muscatel

and a urine pool. I hosed the stench away
Tenants came by rarely on that shift,
one or two on any given Saturday.
The locker room was industrial still-life;

I'd sit in a chair and drift. Terry showed
me opiates: what *all the commotion*
was about. They worked like whiskey, though slowed
something down that whiskey could not, and were done

without stupor and slurring if you were good.
Connie moved to Calgary and Marshall
to the south. Hamilton retired, as did
Brown. The newer men let the brass get dull

and pitted, and the dealers grew even
harder. I remember yearning for Brown's
gentility, and the way his sardines
covered the face of his crackers. Nicotine's

chiefly what I'm using. And only now,
long since cable day -- the bulk of the drivers
certainly gone -- have I come to see how
the limits of those shafted spaces

provided us ascension from our state.
I return whenever I return, yearly,
tri-yearly, and move my hand to the Otis gate
I once controlled, touching the barrier hungrily.

The luncheon pot that Gomez warmed
begins to impart the aroma of stew,
and I cherish the crust which cooking-down has formed.
I am towns, grasses, more ancient than I knew.

IV

Jesus Pissing in the Woods

His eyes scanned perimeters
till he sensed he was alone.
When certain of his solitude,
he arched it out like childhood,
delighted as it spattered down.

Twelve to one he aimed it
at ferns, and as acid seeped
in the loam it met worms,
 though he knew those worms
would writhe.

He held it in his hand,
he shook it out, contracted
 his sphincter twice.

The owls saw, and the dragonflies,
and a couple of proximate mice.

His one consistent solitude: this voiding,
bodily act --
 the place to which his company
were reticent to follow.

A Young Jesuit's Dying

For all the time we lived with him, Victor never told us. Some suspected. I noticed a pill among his vast morning repertoire with blue band encircling white. I guessed it was AZT, checked in a pharmacy book and was right. He let us know from Canada by formal note with perfect diction. His looks became more gaunt and lean; his gait would falter. And in our remembrances now that he's gone, some say he should have revealed it. We're bruised a bit, chastened, like soldiers rebuffed by their don. Yet he knew our cup held precedent for misuse, and the yen to bolt and stray from radical form. In the effort to unglove it, he was getting warm.

Father's Temptation

Just before his preaching begins, sermon
on the podium before him, a rogue desire
mounts within to shock and stun
the Sunday mass: perhaps mooning the choir

or shrieking out obscene *Barnacle Bill-ish* verse
from his youth. He knows, of course,
that then comes treatment -- some Nurse
Ratched probing deep into the source

of why Father fell. These temptations -- sordid
as they are pass quickly, though in their brief
and eerie tenure, the priest stands frail amid
his flock, unable to quell these vivid scenes of grief.

The force which lures him hovers
just beneath a greater force, like fiendish impulse
vainly coaxes, "Driver, swerve into these others."
He senses his refusal is by massive bolts

which barely, barely hold. The inner thread
remains unstripped, though each
defense is stunning in its frailty: coveted
bloodline cheek-by-jowl to fierce, gaping leech.

The Relic Maker

*"I tell you solemnly, no prophet is ever
accepted in his own country." -- Gospel of Luke*

He'd agreed to the task warily, knowing the dead
monk briefly in life -- a reverent sort, though far
from faultless, he mused. The recent canonization --
abbey aflutter, and now this call for relics,
bone chips deemed by the Church holy enough
to bear in their calcium extra-God when just-God
fails. How would it chip, he wondered,
clean or like chalkburst, and what of the bone
pulverised by error, was that saved, too?
He pondered the logistics with no model
to draw from -- no manual left behind by whoever
did it last: some gnarled brother hastened
by an abbot, the relic-sack clamored for in Rome.
He placed in the sack all that he chipped, finding that
yes, dust did gather from such work, a lean skin
of powder before him coating the cellar table,
sanctified perhaps, though finally jettisoned,
side of his hand a slow trowel mounding up,
casting off the grey remnant bone, its flawed
past enfleshment coming to mind: the monk
at Matins dozing off in choir, occasional scowl
on fast days. And now, how muted the prophet-voice
seems, whittled saint pouched in velvet,
deep in the belly of home.

The Glowing Chamber

Within the bulb is filament
coil, shining due to vacuum,
lumen due to void. The bent
wire, fastened in its tomb
is cloistered by a moon suit.
Outer space is in. Inner space:
a crater's trove, something solar, mute,
vacuity as all-defining grace.

And only in such vacancy the light
endures. The merest trace of atmosphere
intruding in, reverts a night to night.
The glowing chamber's silent and austere,
allowing only absence, all which is not.
The vast reels of names are doom
in here, from atom to its spot
of core, all tragic to this brittle room.

Sonnet Named Shambhala

Bowls sing when you rub a wetted fingertip
along the rim. A shelf holds scents named Moss
and Rain. From a background tape, the constant sip
that a streamlet makes, and the sandalwood incense rises.
The owner's often in the back, channelling
with devotees -- fiftyish women whose husbands
(you sense) are moored to a low spiritual plane.
The case devoted solely to miniature dragons
requires a key. I visited Shambhala
each spring while fishing at the river's mouth,
though last May, Shambhala wasn't there.
And through that spring I wondered, was it south
he fled, on widowy money, or was the shaman
righteous as his glossy books on New Age men?

A Sudden Time of Wounding

A sudden time of wounding came -- I bought a gun;
perceptive crows evacuate in haste;
the killing inexplicable, but now it's done.

My last assault, at seventeen, was one
deft shot, sparrow falling pliant and defaced.
A sudden time of wounding came -- I bought a gun.

I swore back then my motive was to merely stun,
to clip the limb where perfect sparrow braced.
The killing inexplicable, but now it's done.

I dealt in mercy -- a long stalkless run
of years. Whatever flew I finger-traced.
And then this time of wounding came -- I bought a gun.

Like dormant seed there's murder in my skeleton,
while all the while I thought such things erased.
The killing inexplicable, but now it's done.

Desire and the purchase came in unison;
discernment had an unconsidered taste.
A sudden time of wounding came -- I bought a gun,
the killing inexplicable, but now it's done.

Obituaries

"Bravely fought a long illness,"
generally meant cancer, I learned.
"Died suddenly," referred to the heart.

I can't quite say why I go to them
even before headlines. I often feel
such interest is a portent of an early

death, though other times I canvass
them with high digits whispering.
I'm whetted by the deaths I know

even obscurely: some boyhood friend's
barely conjured father. The vagueness
doesn't matter -- I can still invoke his face

while in this chair, synopsis of his life
before me, and the queer, bridging knowledge
of knowing flesh which went and leapt the realm.

The Tracing of Maps

I thought as a boy I'd travel,
traced my finger along maps,
spun globes and touched

where they ridged highest:
the Andes flush against the sea,
the blatant jut of Nepal.

I mouthed the word Mongolia
for a week, saying to Matthew
let's go there, or, I shall go there,

I can't remember which. They sell yak
in Ulan Bator marinated on sticks.
The passport lies in my drawer

long-expired, unstamped. I dusted
today, and afterward the room smelled
of lemon. I waited a long time before

smoking, flipped through the travel page
subtracting my years from a reckoned age
to die, overwhelmed, the ads hawking

Aruba in the sun, as body tone slowly fades.
I may never leave America,
this inland dust relentless on the sill,

and how it comes up nicely --
the underwood readied, renewed,
like salt-film wiped from a teak deck.

Capricious Means Erratic

Throughout youth, certain words memory-banked,
 clicked like tumblers opening safes.
To hear them once: sufficient --
 their meaning bound. By thirty-five

I noticed loss: things I'd sealed gone sieve-like
 to the ground. Capricious I still misuse,
conjuring someone I've labeled Caprice, a bashful
 girl, demure. Capricious, therefore,

means shy. Though over and over I duly repeat
 capricious means erratic, it stays elusive,
like wading toward Caprice in a swamp-filled dream,
 legs getting clogged by tendrils.

Gravity Hill

She showed me fields she lounged
in as a girl, and when I asked,
would give the names of crops.

Gravity Hill was a visible rise
in a prairie road. "Watch,"
she said, and shifted into neutral,

front of the car facing the hill,
both feet off the pedals. Bound
as we were to other rules,

liaison seemed improbable,
but gradually the amber Taurus
picked up speed. Something rolled

us up that hill which no one can explain,
the unknown source conjectured, though,
for the air felt damp and changed --

laws of conduct lessened in their gravity.
I thought to touch her bordering
thigh, as if now, in this new dispensation,

all was allowed, every rite of etiquette
breakable, heeded vow suspended,
if ever we had on that county road.

Noel Coward in the Palouse

Despite this Ford truck, my Cenex cap,
I'm no man of the field. Noel croons
of smart teas in Cap Ferrat
as I drive through the March Palouse

each frozen farm centered with its home
amid shade trees. I picture myself
within each house, gauging if I'd find
the sway to flourish in such fields.

Intermittent towns appear -- at each heart
a lone red-light flashing. Men
in coveralls trudge before me, lips
burgeoning with brown juice.

I idle with the windows hiked as Noel
sings within my cab. By my design
these men don't hear I'm passing
through this country only borrowing.