

Bullet Blues

Without Looking Back

I'm slimming myself,
I'm shaving more
and my face is peaking back
from a forward-pointing nose.
I'm hardening and smoothing
myself; making myself like a silver
bullet for passage through this life.
I'm moving fast and independent,
with no places that stick out,
no surfaces to grab onto, hold me back –
and no places
to hold.

Senseless as a bullet, rippling
people like kelp –
they slide off, dead as turnips.
Drill, ricochet –
sleek-peaked frantic-headed bullet
looking for contact.

Bullet Blues

Got to open up,
got to open crazy-wide
got to get free.

Reach back,
reach forward,
gather myself together.

Some parts ache
for mistakes
left go to seed
back of my head.

Some parts are slow
recovering from dreams
I had.

I'm making myself
into a silver bullet
slim and smooth

for passage through this life.
Hard and shiny,
no surfaces stick out –

grab onto,
hold me back –
and no surfaces to hold.

Drill, ricochet,
sleek-peaked frantic-headed
bullet, looking for contact.

Rippling people like kelp –
they slide off,
dead as turnips.

The Virtues of an Inner Life

All the tiny people
running goose-egg naked
through the archetypal veils
of my mysteriously steaming
egg-boiler head.
Their tiny flesh so rare
and smooth – they survive
on a cliff-edge
as sheer as their skin.
Before my judgment they scramble
and I thumbnail them.

Yeah, the Old Notebooks

old notes
3 years old
4 years old –
fermented
half asleep
half awake –
inaudible dreams
unknown fears
wearing other writer's lines
sometimes, like borrowed
tennis shoes
3 sizes too large.
still waiting.

and at night
the torn up pages
uncrinkle in the wastebasket
after I've gone to bed.

On Trying to Throw Away Drafts

Long after I've crumpled them up
and thrown them away,
the papers uncurl in the wastebasket.
I hear them, lying in bed
at night. My rough drafts seek a way out,
they want to crawl
up its slippery plastic side
and make me accede
to their demands.

Numb Dumb Confusion

(A Melody for Daily Prayer)

*Give us this day our ludicrous goal
and absolve us of ourselves
as we absolve those who agree with us,
and never lead us out of our daily grind
for no power, no kingdom, no glory
is worth that kind of struggle.*

numb dumb
confusion
from humdrum
absolution
substitution
diminution
prostitution
comminution.
rheumy gloom
disentombing
exhuming
the human
stumbling
come from
cumbersome triumph
to troublesome
comfort.
mumble-jumble, ramble
number
rumble-slumber
irresolution
circumlocution
devolution
numb dumb numb dumb numb dumb
numb dumb numb dumb numb dumb

The Absurd

is that the children
are in the cookie jar
until they get sick –
which has meaning
only if there is a parent
to say no.
but there is no larger
authority
to prevent excesses
so that when they occur
they are terrifying
in their meaninglessness.

Existentialism

there is
nothing more
than what
there is,

no hopes,

no dreams,

no disappointments.

so what's
eating
you?

At 23, Wondering if I've Grown Up

the bumble bee floating in the dog's
water dish was giant – an inch or more.
fished out on an hydrangea twig,
watched him crawl across the porch.
he'll be frozen by morning
if left out. took him inside
on another hydrangea branch.
released this morning on the rock
by the fence, he spread
his absurd wings and flew off.

the swallowtail butterfly perched
in the road
yellow and black with a splash
of blue and red on his tail
didn't move when I rode by
so I dismounted, picked him up
and moved him to the ditch
out of the way of cars.

Bicycle

I asked for the shop special,
an economy move, but the bikeman
burnished a peek at the high-priced rack
till I thought in light metal alloy
and climbed over her 22" frame.
I lifted: 2-inch clearance. Plenty to avoid
painful mistakes. "She's a sweet scoot"
the bikeman enthused. He led her
out of the corner, a French-American model,
like he had her by the hand.

The economy brand sporadically
dropped bolts in the corner while she put on
her fashion show in a foreign language:
Mafac direct pull brakes, 49er crank,
Reynolds frame that flexes and springs back
on impact ("what impact?" I thought),
Paturaud toe straps.
I looked her leary. But she sneaked
her blue paint job in close –
bought her that afternoon.

At home I played with the gears,
adjusted the back tire –
and dropped the chain on my way to evening class.
Fixing it, I got there late. But we stirred
a cold wind on my knuckles
with the higher gears on the way home.
Leaning the corner out of the schoolyard
we were a blue schooner, going the speed
of midnight, and we sailed.

To the Poetry Class

class.

I am sweating you out like the flu.
you are like jello,
superficially something to eat
but swallowing down – what?
if I tell you what I think
I'll scoop you out like a steel spoon.
jello-fellows wallow in this
for years at universities
until the cartilage of their ears
turns crusty, like old jello.

you are like Hunt's Snack-Pack to me –
flip-top your head
goo-oed, you're *goed*, you good
and sticky all over me.
mud – you chocolate mush,
you are like Jif Peanut Butter to me –
spre-eh, *sprayeh* – spread all over me.
you mumble about the room
like a handful of rabbit dung pretending to be raisins.
you hide in corners at supermarkets
coercing vagrant mothers into taking a sniff.
you Hunt's Snack-Pack and Jif Peanut Butter
you Hunt's-Snack-Pack-and-Jif-Peanut-Butter
you Hunt'sSnackPackandJifPeanutButter –
a bit too commercial
for my taste.

An American Poet's Chorus Answers for the Lack of Political Poetry

if you want the scars, the details, the outrage,
don't come to us.
it all passed through the earth of forgetting
before it got to us.
the groundwater of tears was sieved long ago,
what filtered through to us was cleansed
of any empowering righteous fury.
the traces of civil disobedience,
the enemy's shared humanity with our own
 – all dissolved.
groundwater is purified as it trickles through earth,
 ours was –
the brutality, the economics did not penetrate to us,
the political explanations ran clear.
we forgot.

Night Sweats

(for T.S. Eliot)

If I start awake in a sweat
at night
it is only because I am dreaming
of my daytime
when I wake fitfully, mid-morning,
early afternoon,
to find myself watering the spiderplant,
putting it in the light on the sill,
and then fall back into my hot
coma.

Comment on the Obituaries

when I saw old Mrs. Brockmeier
in her garden,
her pink dress dappled by shade
so that she seemed one of her carnations
I knew it couldn't be long.

Books Fermenting

downstairs, in the sunroom, books
lie flat, distorting life. outside the windows
life billows in the blackberry vines
that overrun the side yard
and swells in warm blackberries growing fat
in the sun. but upstairs, in the middle room
with no windows, the books overflow
their boxes and cover the floor; they ferment
in strange combinations and have
an almost bodily warmth. their
slight breath on the stair
nearly traps me each time
I go up and down from my room.

Something's Slipped Through the Fingers

Something's slipped through the fingers –
it's another day, gone
while its discomforts were still being attended to,
before it began to be lived.

Better run out in the morning,
better leave the minor drugs, the kleenex,
the suntan oil, the carefully prepared script
behind. Get out now, while you can, escape.

First thing when you open your eyes in the morning
jump on the day
and ride it until its sunset breakers
roll ruby in your soul.

Get your bare feet slapping in the warm dust
on the road while the bird you can't identify
loads the morning with high notes.
Go find your friend
before you forget you have one another,
before you both wander off to make a living.

Cleaning A Lid

The grassy mound sheds its seeds
down the tilted record cover,
rolling down the Allman Brothers Band
like notes down the sunlit stoned morning
that pours in the open window
as if out of a pitcher
over the green-branched trees.

The sun
peters down
parties around –
summer – a party
every night.

Self Analysis

my eyes like two burring cones
bore into my head
(from without they are the zero point
vacant, blank, burnt out)
because they have turned
like two knives, two termites
burrowing, drilling out my head.
worm paths in old driftwood
i am sawdust
if i remain this way.

Vaporize

the moments again go
cascading away –
I need to concentrate
on any one thing.

I feel that sickness
in my stomach
of the passing away,
passing away

of the living that I saw
almost condensed
into solidity
but which now vaporizes

into a fog of fine crystals
and I want to catch it!
catch it! but do I lack
the courage to lunge

or is it that I have
the discipline
to steel myself
to watch it dissolve
and filter away?

Coward (for Dick)

"I come from a long line of coat-hangers" you said.
I know you expected me to accept that
for myself – your son.

In a darkened room you approach your life
as if it were a Van de Graf generator
positioned on a chair in the middle
of the room. Spitting and
cracking electric sparks (all your
vitality in it) this classroom
model can do no real harm. Dancing
around it, you must grasp it;
but, like Skinner's rat,
each time it spits, you jump back.

What if one of the experimental rats
slipped from its cage one night
and made its way through the laboratory
to B.F. Skinner's bedroom?
Paused on the threshold, watching
the head, heavy with mazes, snore. . .

but the machine cracks off another load of electrons,
lurching and jerking you back.

Ego

running for the safety of the fence
bent over under the weight of his pack,
face flung over one shoulder –
a twisted little stump of a man
winched up tight against the cold,
running from under a falling sky

sky

the sky
is a slowly
falling
revolving
platter,

a gleam
of light
reflected
at the center
is the moon.

the cool rush of night air catches him
swirls up his gnarled chin
eyebrows
forehead –
swimming in it now, treading water
engulfed.

(a twstd little stmp pf a man
flshed, and running for the fence
bnt ndr his blging pck
shders wnched up tgt agnst
the ice-pick cold:
fce flng

rnnig

Skag

White powder rolled in a joint.
Smoked on mountain
steep hillside mossrocks and logs;
Mt. Walker hike.

The bitch mistress grabs my balls and her
sweet smile runs up my leg
to the brain. Little boy again
swallowed in Momma's unconditional
love. But it's been given
by the white-powder lady and she
takes us all down to little-boy size.

Coming down from the mountain,
coming down slow, the warm
red love fades slow
and the ruby sunset mountains
show in around
the bitch mistress's streaked smile.

Power Song for a Lonely Soul

Oh little bird, oh little bird,
your sorrow is like the night-time,
like the night-time bird.

Oh little bird, oh little bird,
turn on your wings and flee the night-time,
leave the night-time, bird.

*Your wings unfold inside of me,
they beat my ribs and chest.
I try ways to set you free,
I open my mouth, but out comes darkness
and your half-open wings choke my throat.*

Oh little bird, oh little bird,
your sorrow is like the night-time,
like the night-time bird.

Oh little bird, oh little bird,
fly towards the sun, forsake the night-time,
escape the night-time, bird.

*Little bird, what are you seeking?
Your wings push out through my arms;
your pinions nearly burst my breath.
Now where is the harm?
I fly toward my own kind near the sun.*

Oh little bird, oh little bird,
your sorrow dies like the night-time,
like the night-time bird.

Oh little bird, oh little bird,
fly towards the sun and find your own kind,
find your own kind, bird.

*Dawn infiltrates night's unwashed face
like white marbles and dispels it.
The red of morning soon follows
and I circle with companions
higher than I've ever been.*

Oh little bird, oh little bird,
are you leaving us so soon?
Are you leaving, bird?

Oh little bird, oh little bird,
I can scarcely see you now –
you're too high to see!

Steve's Death

i'm treating myself like a child
and oh
in the face of death

i'm afraid. God Steve Olmstead
is dead.

she said
"Steve Olmstead died last night"
as if

it was something people go home and do.

God, Steve Olmstead
i loved you.

For the Poets of Latin America

I. Where They Write

the lamp flickers like a moth;
scale-winged souls of men come

and beat against the bulb;
thin hungry stars crowd
an immense sky, never so far
or full before.

they are like generals,
each
alone in his tent on a small hill,
brooding over his men

before the battle.
all night
the shadow of the general at his desk
is visible through the canvas wall of his lit tent.

there the heart-weary men
aim like moths, come stumbling
to the yellow heart light.

he prays
with fury and with huge tender hands;
his people rise like a moon,
full, never leaving him –

their crepuscular grief
wings the globe's cry –
so many mouths
opening as one black wave, self-terrified
to a poetry of blood
and fire.

at midnight he rises.
hears the warm heart ticking,
the human voice
that welcomes home; sees
the mouth flutter open, the lip tremble;
feels the tears on his shoulder.

II. How Their Deaths Come to Them

the wind lies in the wood
all night
breathing like a winded dog.

a man –
the wind stumbles through his hair
like a frightened laborer.

the moon –
pale and distant
like a little brother
he never knew.

night in gales,
panting and heaving;
bedlam in the ransacked wood.
then oh, no sound.

in the bathroom I have hung

in the bathroom I have hung
a huge poster of Lenin on the wall that slants
over the toilet, reading
Long live the Dictatorship of the Proletariat!
in four languages at the bottom

I burnt incense all afternoon
to rid the apartment of its musty smell.

next I read the poets: Neruda,
then Patchen – all their why's.

somewhere between pissing under Lenin
and lighting Ohio Blue Tips
I forgot
to listen.

the blue archangels
have impounded
the afternoon
and now
improvise the only conversation
there is.