

Mowing in Failing Light

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I thought I had all day to gather in
I planned on a late summer twilight
I planned on the afternoon being as strong
 as the morning was fresh.
I planned on a long and productive evening.
But now I see two-thirds of what I planned
 undone,
the light failing,
my work unfinished,
night coming on.

Mowing the Front Lawn

through the windows a woman
moves through the house,
tending children, fixing food,
quietly self-contained.
the sun floods a living room,
possessions sit in their still
self-possession that can last centuries.
even the roar of the lawnmower
muffled under the mantle of time
that settles over ticking clock,
sunlit halls, afternoon,
through which appears a life
I would like to have.

The Seed

A woman cooking dinner for her family
stood at the kitchen counter,
the cutting board piled with cucumber
tomato, celery, green pepper, red onion,
a clove of garlic. As she sliced and minced
she noticed an irritation in the fold
of her thumb, pressing against the knife handle.
She ignored it for several strokes
then almost without thinking, paused,
opened her thumb, and noticed a small seed
embedded in the soft flesh of her hand.
She brushed the seed from her hand
into the loud and colorful heap
of fresh vegetables and served it
to her family later that evening in a gespacho.
The seed worked deeply into them,
as if it had found a damp place
away in the dark earth. No one noticed.
It was like that with her – quiet,
like a seed or bulb. Warm with an inner
life. Something tiny, indomitable
beating at the heart of her work,
pulling in life from the air around her
to build stems and flowers.
At last, it burst out –
a garden rising from its winter bed,
scarlet, dark maroon, columbine and larkspur
yellows, reds, multitudes of colors.
The family began wearing brighter clothes
and stopped watching television.
They began to talk. Some years later –
a day when the drops of water from the lawn sprinkler
evaporated in mid-air and the deer
worked their way slowly through the yard,
heads down, eating the raspberries
and the young nasturtiums, and the tallest tree
in the orchard, a plum, leaning for more sun,
partially fell and still reached for more,
her husband looked at her, a woman
unpremeditated as a thunderstorm in May,
and wondered, what new wine is this
that, brought to lips,
bites fresh as the first plum of spring

pulled from a high bough? She said
to him I can't believe the frail
rosebud has sprayed the sideyard
with such a scent. Summer ended,
the yellowed age of a late afternoon
caught nodding with the goldenrod
invaded the garden.

Autumn paused brief October prelude,
pondering back on a late summer
suspended in motes of dust,
the light here now fading, now hovering
with the last pale warmth.

How many times she had penetrated
the night with a shaft of work.
From the door, a yellow line cracked
like an egg yolk upon the night,
and she stepped out into the dark yard.
Like a seed she lay out under the night sky,
fields and fields intimated above,
naked as a wet stone in a streambed –
warm, oh the warm water
that washes away, and then
a prayer, a silence, a listening within,
a seed that fell from her.

Multi-Lingual Planet

river rock tongue
throaty gravel;
silver murmur

– the young wife
quiets the house;
the waters of peace flood;
silence follows.

night showers sweep the roof
trains of wind
big freights stopping
at no switch yard.

at first light, a city of birds
the trees like buses
full of morning commuter talk.

soft sleep sounds
the three-year-old's
pink mouth
half-open

sshshshshsh –
sudden crowds of rain
the air silvery

alder, salmonberry
wet leaves
shoulder to shoulder –
Shinglemill Creek
bottomland.

multi-lingual planet
ancient voices
Gaian dying
chorus
our hearing strengthens.

Told

smell of wet wood
smell of grilled salmon
smell of ash, and soil, and dung
smell of a breath that's mingled
 with mine
smell of fresh laundry hung
 on the line
smell of wet dog
smell of thrilled woman
tell of a life that's toiled and sung
told by the breath that singles
 out lines
told from the mouth that mingles
 with mine.

Salmon in Air

May 1997

prodigious runs swam again
in fog over fields
flowed through forests, pulled thin
between trees, poured slowly over
grass, hills,
the huge fish in mid-air
appearing and disappearing
in the mist through which they swam

mist at morning

at morning the clothes
in which the earth had settled
overnight lift
like a breath from her
softening, as it had at dusk,
the trees whose tallness
arise out of nothing,
the sea whose distance
fades quietly toward hills
whose houses, Christmas-lit,
begin to glow,
whose stories fall
everlastingly into memory

Calla Lilies

the kindergarten play yard asway
with fresh-faced calla lilies
still wet from morning
the forehead curve of their petals
white and black, they laugh
jump, clap, and now in a burst
run shrieking with joy,
are grouped by an adult
and cared away.

Little Orange Calico

little breath of damp earth
in my lap

little ballerina cross-wired
who spins and leaps at nothing

little bit of fluff
blown away unnoticed

little humming air –
how much less we would own if we only knew how to purr!

little mew smaller
than the crack you open in night's sleep

ah, less than a mouthful of fur
warm spirit of this house

Big Leaf Maple

These giant leaves Paleolithic
like a house asleep –
 awesome hush
yellows and browns
tones of lamps
mottle corners.
Six cover a counter,
pungence of winter earth
spice. By morning
the supple leafs
become papery,
edges beginning to curl
 inward.
Vitality of nature decaying
into winter. We blaze
into our forties. Their fire
doesn't shrink from it.

A Burst of Wild Homecoming

driving onto Vashon
a burst of wild homecoming breaks out
poetry crowds round
like another's presence in a dark room
a crowd of rustling daffodils
yellow heads unpicked

Fever Evening

though my love
has come to the window
and opened it
to let in the cool night air

though the soul
lays about
where common things
are easily found

though I have thought
repeatedly of rousing
from this dream of dreams

no, I will stay here with the wilted lettuce
in the salad
and the scatted toys underfoot
on which I step,
 the culprits escaped
outside – and
calling already
for me to chase them again.

Seconds

a second, a microlith
a second could be the word stuck in the throat –
the one the one walking away needs.
a second – the not-acting moment.
the Permian extinction, KT boundary,
the eyeblink of history.
a second – numbing drip, or
plunge over the rim.
a second – incessant nagging gnat.
a second, narrow divide,
me on one side,
all my life on the other.

the seconds,
walking away from me
immeasurable footfalls
going

The River Lethe

The River Lethe flows swiftly by here,
swiftly by, swiftly by.
Whenever you arrive, you're already late,
others already come, class adjourned
to storytime, small knots of attentive listeners
gathered round the storytellers,
each telling a life that vanishes in the telling,
each forgetting like a slowly setting sun,
just as it dawns on the audience
that the life story told is its own.

Fall

(homage to Rainer Maria Rilke)

the hot dust smokes under the first drops of rain
shimmer vista softened gray with rain
the smell of the land raised by the wafting puffs of rain
is that of a body loosed from its cloths.
everywhere the golden straw, the reddening leaf
all that burned under harsh flat light
now grows rich, wise, mellow.
reflection halts the blows of heat
the arm of noon that was raised to strike
has been grasped by rain
and a moment urged that cools into infinity
with the realization that we are mortal,
all things are mortal, all mortal things must pass.
so here the apple that has reddened prepares to drop
the field mouse rustles the hawk stoops
the grass has let its seed fall, the rain falls
and the leaves in their blush propose to drop
whatever would be immodest to withhold –
then is nothing not falling
nothing that has not always been falling
nothing not upheld.

Another Misguided Effort

We lie next to one another,
cold as two logs
in a fire that has gone out.
I know I'm lost,
wandering this way and that
reading one book after another,
tending the small bit of fire
that's left.

When night's stillness is great
I become aware of something like a tent
and I at its center
and in it fluttering,
like molecules in Brownian motion,
small sharp birds or winged insects
rebounding from one wall to another
or hovering in the midst of its sealed space,
my tears, kept far
from those they might hurt.

Unresolved

Every morning she turns her Volvo
hard left out of her drive
ahead of me – I know her
by the cut of the back of her hair.
Every morning she drives hard
losing in the winding rings of wood
my little Mini until
coming upon the steep climb
that curves from the road's sharp left twist
like a lemon in a drink
that slows her down
I catch her up.
Every morning thinking
a mysterious lover pursued
would repeat this refrain
in the dark wood of a cello
that returns and returns
and like my life never
resolves that embrace.

Walking Out to the Writing Cabin Late at Night

the stars high and sharp and so cold.
they bring no warmth
but only impossible vastness
each thunderous conflagration silenced
by the impassible illimitable;
titanic balls of gas burning silently,
suspended and tiny
in unimaginable space.
how could such
unbelievable isolation
comfort me?

the moon is a lopsided thumbnail
chewed by clouds.

The Rain Falling

The rain falling
gray skies over gray seas
and the rain falling

visibility an open expanse
of bluegray seas
tossing, falling

 the rain
numbing the seas
the eyes the will
this dull gray view of life
slowly breaks apart
dissolving in bits
circling the drain

 leaving only

gray skies over gray seas
and the rain
 falling

Torn Sail

I hold the ragged pieces together
where they've torn,
flapping in the winds that rise out of the depths
of me, winds rising
through the tear

– torn soul flapping like a sail,
the edges fluttering in gusts, sobbing
sea-rage

holding the rent pieces together,
through the depths rise gusts,
great heaving winds
that never die down completely
tearing easily through the tent of my life
opening the rip to a great flapping tear

gray storms over grayer water.

Early Dawn Down

A Meditation on the Heart

I no longer wish to hold on
to this sack of old sorrow
grown sodden and cold
leave it alack
leave it untold
let it alone, let it unfold
let its speech drip
flow over its lip
out onto the earth
let it sink slowly
and fertilize birth
not my own, one unknown
some young one
that comes
amid runners of sun
pink white and gold
that stipple the fields
an early dawn down
a teasing light breeze
limbers the town
the wind whirrs
and whines, the walls
all feathered by fir
patterned by pine
let it be golden and old
dancing and young
let it be words
on the tip of the tongue
let it slip from the hand
aloud on the land –
dearth winks out
day's boat comes about
morning sun freehold
lifts the stone cold.

The Abandoned Bonfire

the abandoned bonfire goes down into its coals.
this morning I heap up the unburnt ends
of sticks and twigs; a soft ash –
reading Kant, Emerson, Hegel; men long dead –
shortly, a small flame leaps up.

Cards and Coins

(on my 53rd birthday)

I have gathered in my hands so many bright coins,
I have collected cards painted in such limpid colors
they seem to be alive. I love to hold them,
but they are not mine to keep.
How quickly they fall through my fingers
with the years, and yet
still I will not let them go.
How am I to accept the passing of all of time
when I cannot even accept the passing of this weekend?
Ah these that I took to be gold coins –
more like a fine gold thread sliding through my hands.
And the cards – frames from a moving picture
that's running even now.
This thread I picked up from the landscape
runs on and on.
These frames have all gone by, the story in some later scene
stills from a movie still playing in the only movie house
in town, where it's been engaged to run for years.
When I die someone will go through my things
and say "what are these tokens?"
and "here are a few cards from some deck,
some game I do not know" and throw them out
where they belong, belonging, as they always
have, to no one.

Aver a Life

As a prefix, “a” inverts meaning, indicating the lack of whatever the prefaced word would bring, as if the souls of words could be sucked away as in amorality or apathy.

But then “a verse” is just a stanza of rhyme, but *averse* stands opposed, and while “a version” is just one of a number, yet in *aversion* one turns away.

We speak here of *inversions*, a word which turns on the root “ver”
a “direction toward” embedded in its Latin etymology,
as in *avertere*
or *aversio*
alive in the Italian *avere*, which only means
“to have”
whereas in English “to aver” is to make a positive
declaration
that descends from truth.

Perhaps that hidden root contains the spontaneous movement of life toward wordless self-revelation as when, playing outside the battered cheapside house toward which the slumming social workers struggle against their uphill *aversion*, the 5th grade boy sets a clear course true to the heart of his life.

Twelve sailors set to sea and were imagined over the horizon
or twelve tiny soldiers slogged up the mud ridge at the edge
of the driveway puddle and were sacrificed to the endless day.

Let Us Take One Word and Set it Aside

Let us take one word and set it aside.
Let it mean something incomprehensible,
something that cannot be spoken,
so that it can no longer be what it is – a word.

The further it is cast out of language,
the more it will contain –
no longer in our world, but our world in it
and we in our world.

To My Sister

It is certain one of us will go first
we come and go like breath
but to what purpose
“disturbing the dust on a bowl of roses”
I do not know.

The mind cannot stay with great loss
it goes like a bee
from flower to flower

Perhaps

perhaps at the end I will come walking up out of
the darkness,
the smell of blackberries filling the August night air.
perhaps I will emerge from the long dark drive
so close-walled by wild growth the sky cannot be
seen above,
and where I come out, under a few stars
in a clearing, under an earthly light reflected off
low clouds,
there may be blackberries still warm
from the day's sun. perhaps I will be prepared then
to say what I have done or not done. perhaps,
perhaps
I will come unexpected at the last moment out of
the dark closing in
before it is too late before the gangway is taken up
before the ferry sails before the words die in my
throat –
unlooked for, but arriving perhaps just before
the last one lingering at the deck rail turns and goes,
my sister waiting
heartsick, having hoped better of me.

I Suppose Death Will Be Like This

I suppose death will be like this –
at a moment unnoticed I quietly leave the house,
slip by the gate, the exact moment of my passing
unmarked, and standing in the dark alone
turn back a moment on the road beyond to look back
at the warm light of which I was once a part
already no longer embraced by what is going on within
so far outside all that by now,
untouched it seems but in truth no longer there
and quite without regret to be going,
the irrevocable distance having already made
it a matter of indifference, to me if not them.

The Sound of Distant Mowing

The advice to follow the breath
is not meant, “with effort” –
for breath, like the tick of a clock
or return of a wave
needs nothing, goes on
to monotonize, hypnotize
like the motion of an ancient woman
sewing, hand and arm
stitching thread in and out,
in and out, over a lifetime,

over the long day of a sower
whose dumb gesture is seed-thrower

not so different from
the warm thrum of the mower,
a yard away,
heard waking from a nap
moving lazily
back and forth, back and forth
over the summer lawn –
the sound of summer itself,
a long, lazy drone like the hum
of a giant dragonfly, hovering

over the long day of summer
whose mum word is flower.