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Canada

4 Poems

David McGimpsey

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

English

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts at  
Concordia University  
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

February 1990

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ABSTRACT

4 Poems

David McGimpsey  
Concordia University, 1990

The work is comprised of four long poems. The first is a narrative concerning legendary baseball hero Babe Ruth and his amorous adventures in the underworld. The second poem is a sonnet sequence that uses the folklore of urban legend to reconstruct a boyhood memory. The third poem is about the hard-living country and western singer Hank Williams. More specifically, it is about the guilt and momentos of the man who drove the car Hank Williams died in. The last poem is based on characters popularized by the tv show The Facts of Life. Here the characters are contracted to a business venture and they must confront the limits of their self esteem as they ponder the future of a product.

"Babe Ruth," "The Babysitter," "New Year's Eve" and "The Facts of Life Girls' Factory" are obviously connected to the world of popular culture that they are drawn from. The work challenges the perceptions of this culture and rests in a territory between satire and celebration.

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"I found the thing  
For which I prayed  
And came back home  
To the USA  
With a heart of stone  
So now I know  
That it's the same  
Wherever you go."

- Shane MacGowan



BABE RUTH IN LOVE

Babe Ruth in Love

Babe Ruth, Yankee slugger extraordinaire,  
Red Sox lefty who never lost a World Series game,  
neck tumor / throat cancer victim,  
victor over millions of hots dogs & beers,  
is just another who didn't really die.  
Pals, he just excused himself from his hospital bed,  
too scrawny for pinstripes,  
his face drooping, badly ravaged,  
& wandered out under the weary stars  
& went somewhere altogether Ruthian  
& picked himself up a brontosaurus bone.  
He had a few & gnawed away the prehistoric gristle  
till his teeth were as sharp as the Spanish blade  
& the dinosaur bone was fashioned,  
alla Bambino, into some kind of Louisville slugger.  
& he put it in the trunk of his black sedan  
& he got behind the wheel of his black sedan  
& drove into the dreary heartland:  
state welcome-signs whizzed by his head,  
at the corner of his eyes  
like so many Walter Johnson pay-back pitches.  
Night cold & dark as spilling shark gut  
heavy w cuttlefish ink,  
as far as the eye can see.

The baseball star ends up  
in some part of the great prairie,  
gets out of the car,  
his eyes sunken & purple, his jowls dangling,  
& he walks into some earnest cornfield.

"It just takes one hit!" Babe yells  
& starts swinging his stick into the tall corn.  
From the left side, really letting loose;  
in a whirlwind of intense power  
he starts demolishing the field  
whacking the corn into pulp / pig fodder,  
mashing the green out of the leaves,  
sending the stalks into other counties.  
"Fuck Iowa!" he says  
"Fuck the cornfields, & the green blades of grass,  
fuck the Mighty Casey & his Mudville saps,  
fuck Frank Capra & the white sugar ulcer  
given to me & this goddamned game."  
The John Deere combine of his swing,

the force of his grip turning his knuckles white,  
& he finishes off the cornstalks  
until the field is clear, good as plowed,  
& Ruth just starts pounding into the earth  
& lumps of worm-thick sod are uplifted,  
sent flying above & beyond  
the smell of damp soil overwhelming,  
like dark blood from a stomach wound.

& Babe starts burrowing downwards --  
a mad miner on a strange mission --  
he beats through roots, the layer of top soil,  
rocks, clay, through Indian graves & solidified oil.  
Through the earth's crust ultimately  
just hitting, hitting w all the rage  
his cancer had brought on, singing  
"Tessie, Tessie, won't you come home."  
Through the fossils, to a spot magma hot,  
a cavern in the fold of the deep earth,  
the hole in the ground that Ruth built.  
& all of a sudden there's a bit of light,  
a dim yellow porch stoop light  
& there's a bucket of baseballs  
each one grimed over w red Maryland mud  
& signed "A. Bartlett Giamatti."  
So Babe does what comes natural:  
one by one he flips the balls in the air,  
takes his primordial stick  
& starts belting line drives,  
& long roping shots, arcing into the dark,  
way past the confines of any fence  
500, maybe 600 feet.  
He never hears the balls land  
or bounce off the cavern walls.  
& George Herman Ruth,  
the bad kid from Baltimore,  
the red, white & blue cigar-chomping  
skirt-chasing, whisky-drinking,  
ball-playing embodiment of a country's soul  
kept merrily swatting away.  
Crack! Crack! Crack!  
The more he hit out into the hollow,  
the more the flood lights would come on,  
until he could see ominous red stalactites  
ready to break & kill  
& a yellow kitchen door flush  
w the damp rock wall.  
He finished w the bucket of balls,  
a blood blister at the base of his right hand,  
& we:t & peered through the door's screen.  
All he could see was a cool blue light flickering.  
He banged on the aluminum  
& said "anyone home?"

He opens the door, says it again inside  
& somebody inside, a male voice, goes  
"take off your shoes!  
We just had the carpets done!"  
Babe kicks off his loafers  
& walks gingerly to where the voice  
& the blue light are coming from.  
His face is pale as mouse-fur  
& he wears a wet, f 'e smile.  
Through a hallway w prints of barns  
& by a small bathroom w towels askew  
he ends up at a living room  
where a family is watching color tv.  
They are watching a show  
about a family just like them.  
The mother says to the guest  
"can I get you something?  
Some slippers for your feet?"  
The tv is bigger, nicer than anything  
he has ever seen.  
"Wow. This is a weird place.  
For a second I thought I was in hell,  
or at least some kind of purgatory."  
& when the commercials are on, the father says  
"well, it used to be something like that here  
but y'know how complaisant  
things have got. We can't be bothered."  
All the ads are for self-improvement products:  
whiter teeth, flatter stomach, bigger hair.  
"Listen Jidge", the father whispers  
not to disturb the family,  
"you're not out of the underworld yet."  
But there would be no lip-smacking Cerberus  
no towers of white hot acetylene fires,  
no cow gut spilling over the freshly whipped head,  
no visceral humiliation of the beast  
that made its way through a human life.  
After the show, an older man, maybe an uncle,  
takes Babe aside, lights a cigar,  
a Davidoff-Corona hand-rolled in Cuba  
& hands it to the Babe.  
He says, like he has somewhere else to go  
"Just through that door,  
the one w  
the stained-glass my niece designed,  
just through that door you go  
& there, all of a sudden, just like that  
you will be in Ocean City Maryland 1991,  
& you'll be on the beach  
& you'll meet someone.  
Her name is Kate, I think."  
& Babe complimented him on the cigar,  
thinking again that this is really weird

this is just about the end  
& the old man starts singing  
"the people way down below  
have got a new m.o...."  
& he wheels about, catches his breath  
& tells Ruth where he is going:  
a world full of oil spills, radon gas,  
PCBs, fluorocarbons, H<sub>2</sub>S, benzene,  
& monoxide & acid rain.  
Where there's the AIDs virus, increased cancer,  
rampant starvation, continued political blindness,  
crackhouse murders, serial killers  
& a nuclear build up to blast  
all our little tales of way down below  
& baseball into the cold lungless air of space.  
Babe, then, just wants to go fast  
to get out from below  
into the dangerous place  
to check out the woman behind the door;  
he's heard it all before he says.  
But before he heads out, he's stopped.  
The old man says "if  
you want to leave  
you have to help us w this crossword".  
& the uncle pulls out a tattered newspaper clip,  
squints & asks  
"what's a 4 letter word for 'sultan's work'?"  
"That's easy" Babe says,  
"Swat!"  
& he pats the uncle on the back  
& runs on his spindly legs,  
never looking back, out the door  
to the beach beyond.

II

Babe:

I still have more to say about Baltimore,  
more to say about beefsteak & beer.  
More to say about left-handed clout,  
the high inside one  
& my untested ability to manage a team.  
I think mean tiny Huggins would understand.  
What's a little trip to the underworld  
& a life on the beach in the future  
to a career in the major leagues?  
The destruction of the world is nigh.  
You can look it up, I was Babe Ru'h  
taking my 714 cuts  
until my body couldn't take it anymore.  
That old hospital room, all white  
as a high starched collar;  
a state of the art tv in the corner,  
buzzing static into the lonely nights  
& my body, my leviathan, wasting away.  
The mayor of New York city would drop by  
& he'd call me 'George,' look away,  
squint into the glare of the windows  
& summon the nerve to ask  
for autographs for his kids.  
It didn't bother me because I like kids.  
I was a bad kid. Always in trouble.  
See you in hell, Mr. Mayor,  
the crack of the bat, the thrill of the grass  
never were foremost on my mind.  
It was the money, the women, the homers.  
Dying w a cancer you understand  
was only the second time,  
when I couldn't play anymore  
& the second time a less dramatic death.  
I only hope every man or woman who lives  
that painful diagnosis  
& goes through all the crap doctors  
insist is the proper thing to do,  
manage to make it through,  
to a Maryland beach to rediscover love.

Kate:

Is that what's going on?  
We seem to spend so much time watching gulls,  
eating shellfish, watching gulls,  
sighing, 'look at the buggers go.'  
It seems unlikely.

But I always forget,  
especially when the beach is grey, overcast,  
muddy --  
are we ghosts?  
I always forget if we are ghosts or not?

Babe:

Well I don't think we're real people,  
but I've always felt like that,  
but we're no ghosts.  
I'm pretty sure of that.  
Remember that spaghetti last week?  
Crunchy as peanut shucks  
& tasting like solidified ketchup.  
I wished then, again,  
that we were vapors, unconscious  
of those indignities like hunger.

Kate:

O Casper, what ballfield  
did you pick up these gems?  
I like your style of hunger.  
48 oysters in an afternoon,  
2 pints of fried shrimp  
the list is as long as the shoreline  
& dull as the evil that lurks in men's hearts.

Babe:

Kitty, a little avoir du poids  
brings out the slugger in me:  
makes that time in the way-back  
seem more real,  
assuring the un-ghost in us.  
Was I in the middle of a baseball tale?

Kate:

OK, Babe, let's hear it.  
Tell me about it  
till I'm cupping my ears & screaming.  
Spin the old diamond yarns  
until the Maryland firearm-laws change.  
Round the flattened bases again,

& point your finger into the stands  
& deliver.  
Elaborate,  
make the green fields jade  
& turn the whole wide sea out there  
into a rivulet of tobacco spit  
that dries between the spikes of your cleats.  
Babe Ruth legends should obscure the sun  
w the shade of your hanging belly;  
take your place beside Washington  
impishly downing the cherry tree,  
& John Dillinger's complicitous lady in red.  
Take your cue from Davy Crockett  
who gouged the larynx out of a mountain bear  
& tamed a few wolves  
without so much as tilting his hat.  
Make a date w Lana Turner  
as she sits lonely at the drugstore fountain  
ready to be discovered, go Hollywood  
& mooned over from the moist dark seats  
that are lost in the back of theatres.  
The truth is irretrievable  
& the good news is nobody cares!  
What matters now is that moment,  
when the stink of the legend connects  
& we can luxuriate in our hopes  
that somewhere out of the orphan blue  
somebody can step up & park the pellet  
beyond the loose skin we call our own.

Babe:

We played baseball w the priests,  
their cassocks lifted up dust  
along the basepaths  
& they numbly fingered their rosaries  
as they took their leads,  
& gave hail Marys when it was hit  
mostly by me, into the skunkweed.

Kate:

...& they preached fair play  
& gave that little Father Flanagan wink  
to the boy on the wild side...  
Something along those lines,  
Bimboni, right?



Babe:

Brother Mathias taught me everything  
about pitching: including the stoic stare  
to the guy considering an easy steal.  
And we played until our faces peeled.  
Oh that was a different Baltimore, &  
before I was Jack Dunn's Babe, Dinnie's Babe, Babe Ruth.  
& it's not just the 5¢ beer  
& the absence of the big glass buildings.  
People walked slower,  
had that hearty rice & beans accent.  
Now all I read about the place  
is crabcakes, orioles & hair-dos.  
Hoodie doodie do.  
But then again, this isn't Baltimore  
& we were never Catholic.

Kate:

And neither was Roger Maris who hit 61 in 1961,  
of all the dead poetries we could revive,  
while the greenhouse effect turns the USA  
into a huge stretch of Sahara,  
baseball as religion would seem the hardest.  
Your impact measured today would equal  
5 million dollars per annum  
& your face on an Andy Warhol.  
Why go over the wretched personal past  
when there's so many World Series games  
to talk about, so many ways to fall asleep?  
So let's play make-believe, swing,  
give the same pre-Agincourt speeches  
about mosquito-heavy infields,  
playing w pain  
& reaching for & hacking away,  
again & again, that 2-strike pitch.

Babe:

Yes. Kids struggling in, say, the Carolina league  
will be sent on the bus back home  
after a couple months of McDonalds  
& trouble w breaking pitches.  
Back home, only 2 months after their parents  
had a big barbecue for them  
& the neighborhood guys waved way to go  
as the dull silver bus spit dark exhaust  
& made its way to Raleigh, Durham, wherever.  
I never went through that much.

I feels lucky.  
Why is it that we just sit here  
watching this beach lose its summer?  
Why don't we go, I mean, why don't we go  
& raise a family in the Hamptons?

Kate:

Well, from what I figure -- we can't.  
I think I'm supposed to help you get it right  
& once you did, once you got it right, I could go dancing,  
wear pearls & visit Hawaii.  
I could PhD my afterlife to the lees.  
But I'm afraid to --  
the people down below said  
"get the ballplayer to get it down right, ok,  
the way we'd like to see it, ok,  
at 15 minute intervals, without swearing, ok,  
& no frontal nudity."  
It's their show I figure, & it's not bad,  
so I'm afraid of what the pigs might do.

Babe:

Kill us dead? Murderlize? What's that?

Kate:

Dead as dead.  
Maybe dead as the heavy tar ball  
they used before you made yourself king.  
When all that was expected was  
the little game; pushing the runner along --  
but I see your point,  
what could be done to us now?  
This talk isn't getting us there.

Babe:

Well the time has come to stretch out  
& take a bus to the big city.  
See some major league baseball  
& visit some warm, smoky, bars.  
Let's do it. Let's get busy.  
Take the dog to Baltimore,

eat steak till we drop  
& fall asleep in the largest bed of the best hotel,  
leave this stretch of wonder to vultures,  
to hitchhikers & the many  
who do well in bathing suits  
w no recollection of your kindness.

III

Babe Ruth & Kate Reilly leave the beach  
they have been sitting around for too long.  
They throw their chairs, their beachclothes  
into the surf & stand a bit & watch  
them crash again & again into the shore.  
Kate wears this hat: half straw, half suede,  
an enormous floppy brim  
that would make a hippy blush.  
Babe promenades like a circus impresario  
shaking off the salt air drowse,  
& swaggering all the way to  
the bus station full of paint chips,  
smell of stale coffee  
& weary people sitting around,  
waiting for their rides.  
At the bus station he lights a cigar & pontificates:  
"These are the type of folks who either say nothing,  
or tell you eagerly about their first time  
& sing the chorus of the saddest country song  
you ever heard."  
It sure isn't the luxury night train to Chicago  
full of liquor, card games,  
& laughs about the impending drubbing  
of the disgraced Sox.  
But he takes his seat on the aisle,  
lets Kate have the view,  
& he takes the bus driver's shout  
"put out that blasphemous cigar" in stride.  
It is late in the summer of 1991.  
George Bush is president,  
& all he is sure of  
is that the flag needs constitutional protection  
to forever illegalize its desecration.  
The president still makes \$200,000 per year.  
Orel Hershiser, Dodger righthander  
spectacular MVP of the 1988 World Series  
makes \$2,766,667, guaranteed.  
Once again, he had a better season.  
Mark Langston, west coast flake who's  
never won 20 games makes \$3.2 M per annum,  
go figure, have a hot dog & a smile.

If, like the crab, you could go backwards  
you might meet Kate Reilly,  
a young woman w a small nose,  
& dry black hair  
in Washington D.C.  
Her mother was an English cook  
who spent her life making puddings  
for the well-to-do: blood, yorkshire, figgy.  
She followed John Reilly w his curly hair

to that part of America, 1905,  
& her mother died after a whole series of kids  
& watching John Reilly drink, fight, lose money  
& screw up the lyrics to "The Auld County Down."  
Too many brothers & sisters,  
too much shouting to be heard  
& punctuating every discussion  
w a proud slam of the door.  
Her mother died w cancer, except  
Kate never heard that word, cancer,  
just the croak of "Jesus has her now."  
John Reilly then decided to kill himself too.  
Nothing fancy; just whisky, work, more work  
& girlfriends he treated like whores.  
John would spend Sunday nights  
trying to be nice but he would insult everyone:  
"No, Katie, there's nothing in you  
but a head of foolish dreams."  
Then in 1939, amidst the din  
of shouts to stay out of another European war,  
when John Reilly started to blackout  
& piss in his trousers,  
Kate managed to fall in love,  
& quick to form, to fall pregnant  
by some shaky married man  
who knew things about the government.  
That was when she went to Baltimore,  
went to Baltimore to have something done.  
The G-man gave her \$400  
& she took a short train east  
& did what had to be done  
because that married man was a lost cause,  
as lost as all married men.  
From D.C. to Baltimore in February  
the carriage rocking, moving through a gentle snow  
& everybody looked emptied, lost,  
like people in the Greyhound station in 1991.  
But Kate had some strength,  
she was depressed, definitely not hungry,  
but she could remember thinking  
"this isn't death, this is motion,  
I'm not really starving -  
& I'll never go back to Washington."

Certain things didn't work out.  
She discovered her quick, powerful temper.  
She would overturn & wreck typewriters  
if just one letter come out wrong,  
& she would tell a customer to drop dead  
if she suddenly didn't like their tone.  
She took a job in a dance hall,  
the staircase painted yellow,  
where drinks were 2 times the regular price.

She did her hair one foot high,  
didn't change her name to Cheryl or Ginger,  
danced for men, took care of herself,  
had relationships, a few serious,  
but she never cared for marriage.  
Had friends, too many maybe,  
never learned to cook,  
ate too much Italian food & in her 30's  
got pudgy as a little Buddha  
& all of a sudden developed a cancer:  
she couldn't stop hacking.  
"Jésus t'ai " "  
the nun assigned to her room  
taught her to say.

She lay there, waiting for a miracle.  
She remembered her father  
teaching her brothers how to box.  
Telling them not to cry out,  
let the hit, if it comes, do its worst.  
A fist in the gut is followed w breathlessness,  
a bug-eyed silence, he says,  
& that's it, you catch your breath,  
you curse the world & the nationality  
& the mother of the guy who hit you  
& you come up swinging like there's no tomorrow.  
Which of course there isn't  
when you've been hit like that.  
Cancer is no punch to the stomach,  
it isn't the smell of bleach,  
or a bad month-long drunk.  
It isn't being hit by a Mack truck,  
or having barbed wire dragged  
through your intestines.  
It was then what it is now: death, Jesus or no.

Kate Reilly, B-girl, dance hall doyenne,  
single woman throughout the war,  
never riveted a single ship in the Chesapeake,  
or fell in love w any of the dopey uniforms,  
haircuts, of any officials associated  
w putting an end to the Nazis & the Japanese.  
Smoker, gourmand, alcoholic,  
lung cancer victim,  
she just got up from her hospital bed  
her body all of a sudden ready  
to fox-trot or rhumba  
under the bitter moonspots of the mirrorball.  
& she spun around the room  
thinking this is better than a million,  
& sang "Catch a Falling Star"  
& just got the idea & ran, ran right smash

through the window expecting nothing,  
but somehow feeling she would  
just feather through the night sky  
still singing, her cotton nightgown flaring out  
& all of a sudden she's resting easy  
on this dark wet knoll of clover.  
Before she has time to celebrate her freedom  
from the hospital & jig on the heath  
these midget people, men & women,  
hairy w hardly any teeth,  
start surrounding her, cajoling her,  
speaking a quick language she doesn't understand.  
They bring her by her wrists through a well  
& down below to a damp cavern,  
in violet light  
trudging through ankle-deep water eddying w rats,  
trudging until they get to a stairwell,  
of wrought-iron  
& through to a little theatre,  
not unlike something in Greenwich Village,  
where the troll like people sit down in the seats  
& bring out their snacks  
& shove Kate towards the stage  
& seem to expect a show.  
Kate doesn't think much, but, "get real, runts",  
but something is deep in her legs,  
a Jesus fever at the ankles.  
She hears the music to "Up Above My Head"  
she figures what the hell  
& does her little Morris Dance up there,  
"I just won't look at them."  
The audience applauds, one even videotapes.  
Kate finishes sweaty & they are roused  
& then they stand around afterwards  
drinking something like plum wine.  
These are no leprechauns, they are solid  
protein-heavy thrill seekers,  
just a little on the small side.  
After the reception they adjourn  
to this manicured lawn, green as Fenway  
& they play croquet.  
Chagrined, Kate starts to holler.  
"What about me? You little shitheads!  
What about me?"  
& in a broken underworld accent  
one of the steroid dwarfs says:  
"You do the hokey-pokey  
& you shake it all about".  
& they laugh & Kate thinks  
she is in trouble but they shove her towards  
a small column, towards a shaft of light  
& they're saying "Babe Ruth, Babe Ruth, Babe Ruth"  
& a voice says "get it right. In 15 minute intervals  
& no swearing & no frontal nudity."  
& she walks up that corridor  
& ends up on an Ocean City beach in 1991.

The bus driver was also a preacher  
who kept reminding the passengers  
of up-coming tourist sights  
& that God was real. "They might  
not feel that way coming on the dog,  
but I want them to feel Jesus in their hearts  
when they step out into the jungle of Baltimore."  
But once they get to the city,  
Babe goes around the old neighborhood,  
finds a bar that reminds him of days gone by  
& drinks himself into oblivion.  
It doesn't take long.  
Kate stands in the back  
at the pay-phone  
making motel reservations  
& when Babe falls down  
she takes him to the Best Western Motel downtown  
& pours him over the coarse bedspread,  
his pug nose red & round like a crabapple  
& snoring just right away.  
Kate goes out to a ballgame alone.  
Orioles over Twins, 7-2, catcher  
Mickey Tettleton hits a couple shots  
& Kate gets a bit sick  
on peanuts & cold pork hotdogs.  
The only blessing of their whole stay so far  
is that Kate & Babe had thick rolls of 20's & 50's  
& they could take taxis anywhere.  
Kate thought it was strange, going to the game alone.  
She looked around the park & was shocked to see  
how many people went alone.  
But the upshot is that there's always people  
at the ballpark & at least you can talk ball.  
& Kate would come back to the Best Western  
& wake Babe Ruth up.



IV

Babe:

What have you been doing?

Kate:

Trying on your suits.

Babe:

A bit oversize perhaps, a bit funny looking,  
& no doubt some kind of hilariousness.  
Har. Har. I thought we're going to the game.  
The modern day O's Oh, Oh,  
who play in a stadium dedicated to war dead.  
Aren't we supposed to repartee  
after the game about the new world  
vis-à-vis the game, the neutron bomb  
& the effects of global heating?  
Are we late for the game?

Kate:

I salute your resilience,  
there will be a reception; a raw oyster bar  
will be set up & you can go at it.  
But the ballgame is long gone.  
Birds over Twins 7-2,  
this catcher hit 2 dingers into the night.  
I wasn't alone, drank beer w strange guys  
had a great time.

Babe:

Oh well, Kitty,  
you have to pass out for some occasions,  
no matter how wonderful they may be.  
There hasn't been an Academy Award winner  
that I haven't slept through. Still  
a homerun is a thing of beauty,  
a screaming nightmare for pitchers, full of death  
& heavy breathing.

Is it still the same meaningless trot around,  
the same salt-in-the-wound gait?  
360 feet, peddling the square, telling the pitcher  
it was a pleasure, telling the fans,  
that shot was for you.

Kate:

Well, you've read about the changes in the game.  
The artificial grass, the designated hitter,  
black players, black managers,  
million dollar contracts  
& double knit polyester uniforms.  
Games are longer too but out there  
it seems the same, maybe even better.

Babe:

It has no choice but to mirror  
the changes throughout the country.  
In its thousand intricacies  
is a history of our fragile hopes.  
Not just players but fans,  
little league mothers in the stands,  
vendors, scalpers, newspeople,  
groupies, greenskeepers, all of us  
embroiled, more & more, in the complexity  
of rising up & trying to win.

Kate:

It's faster & noisier.  
It's still the same quick-bat grace  
that gets the fans going. That is that.  
But I feel funny about our relationship, Babe,  
you don't seem so thrilled  
& I think you get too morose,  
or at least too much like a moose.  
The most irretrievable truth about baseball  
is that sometimes it's a bore.  
Why don't you interrupt w that piece  
you've been working on,  
the really sleazy rhyme about that girl  
you knew somewhere around Washington.

Babe:

"We had a good time  
but we ended up eating shitty Chinese.  
We struck oil, we had some fun.  
She said both her parents were addicts,  
but she's over that by now.  
The cat slinks out the window  
& somewhere the elephant trumpets his song.  
She didn't care too much for the food  
'but that's no reason why we can't get along.'  
So I took her to the hotel again,  
found it much too small again  
& admitted I was crazy about her, when  
I held my hands lightly against her back  
& forgot all about that awful oriental snack."

Kate:

Well maybe it's better to stay on course,  
to wax over the grass-stained pinstripes,  
the orange pop in the stands  
& pretend the score doesn't matter.  
The conservative dream of how it used to be  
natural grass, day games, hitting pitchers,  
is also the era of segregated leagues  
where players were owned by teams  
& paid like migrant workers.  
You should congratulate yourself  
for turning this into the business it always was.  
& what is important, more than anything,  
is winning. I think that's it!  
That is the made for today sound-bite:  
a simple re-working  
of Lombardi's edict.  
Winning is the only thing.

Babe:

O!  
You're right.  
Just now I heard this strange voice,  
a chirrupy high voice tell me  
to go to Ft. Lauderdale w you now, now,  
blow a bundle on the horses!  
& check out this year's new crop  
at spring training.

Kate:  
(singing)

"& the preceding message to you  
has been through the courtesy of  
the Fort Lauderdale Chamber of Commerce."

Babe:

It always has to end in a beach Motel  
or in & around a beach,  
doesn't it:  
Otherwise how would I get along,  
why would I go through w this?  
Am I supposed to expose my true feelings?  
Problems w parents, baseball, friends  
even you, Kitty -- I don't worry about that,  
there's always something good on tv  
& I like the taste of beer.  
So let's get real good at volleyball  
& curse ultra violet rays in the sun  
& if I can just hang out  
I will gladly tell you  
that Eddie the Eagle Edwards  
is the only athlete who ever got it done,  
& Mr. Rufus Harley's bagpipe blues  
are the most soulful sounds in town.

Kate:

But I do have more to say about Baltimore,  
more to say about tassels spinning  
& glasses of amber slipping into night.  
So pogue mahone, my dear, as if  
we'll go to Florida tonight.  
You haven't been Babe Ruth so long  
that I'll refuse a cheese sandwich.  
This whole trip has me feeling sort of small  
& trapped in the grey of a pigeon cote.  
Oh, there's always a chance to put more salt in the sea  
& a chance to live to see another winter.  
Flip the thing, sprinkle onions on it  
& call it what you want.  
Play the 1927 World Series in 1991,  
I'm ready for anything now,  
just tell me that this isn't love.

V

Babe Ruth has dreams of popping them,  
high & mighty, has dreams  
of him & Gehrig popping them in every park ever made.  
He dreams, nods off around the green space  
of Earl's Sea-Fry, located around highway 84,  
also known as Alligator Alley,  
It's near Ft. Lauderdale, winter home of the NY Yankees.  
Beautiful sunny seasonal sty to collegiates,  
is also the birth place of Earl Jenkins, curdmugeon,  
& once sort-of-famous as a young tv actor.  
Earl played the role of loveable sidekick Hinky  
in the subcult classic sitcom "Remember Jack?"  
The comedy followed the misadventures  
of Jack Daniels Clark, an old ballplayer,  
who had a graceless way & tug on the heart.  
Some characters, like Hinky, dismissed old Jack  
& said he had "taken too many for the team."  
Hinky's snide asides & putdowns like  
"What am I supposed to do? Tell you how I feel?"  
became quite popular & were seen on buttons & t-shirts  
throughout the country.  
(& for a few seasons, the show topped the Nielsons.)  
Earl Jenkins's acting career fizzled out early,  
so he moved to Florida & started up Earl's Sea-Fry  
just out of the way of the Yankees winter park.  
& every spring early Yankee fans storm the place  
to eat enough fried crustaceans & mollusks  
to put Earl in the black for the rest of the year.  
Over the years, many of the stars have dropped by  
& there's a new Pascual Perez Clam Roll on the menu  
in honor of his most recent millionaire ballplaying diner.  
The Babe Ruth special is still up there. For \$16.95  
you can eat 2 quarts of a deep fried deep sea medley.  
"Not only could Babe out-hit,  
Babe could out-eat anybody," the sign reads.  
Now Earl Jenkins doesn't like to admit it  
& doesn't say a thing,  
but almost 50 years after his supposed death  
Babe Ruth has been hanging out at his fry-stand,  
having coffee w him, talking baseball, & sometimes  
helping Earl sweep up at night.  
"I don't need the money, Earl, but I insist on being paid  
for a job", the Bambino says.  
& sometimes when he just wants a nap  
he sits by a picnic table, gets a beer,  
a newspaper & crashes out on the grass,  
the sound of traffic roaring through his dreams.

It wasn't easy, the move to Florida.  
Once they were settled in a hotel room  
& Babe was traipsing out in the field at night,  
when the moon would uselessly dangle bright over the park

he would hit fungoes out to Kate who took  
an interest in the game. They got cable,  
they got ICE-E brand air conditioning  
& everything seemed great, & Babe was ready.  
Ready to enjoy life like never before.  
But then Babe had a heartattack,  
& then Kate had a stroke.  
Then he had another heartattack  
& she had another stroke.

"I don't think I thought this stuff would happen."  
"Especially after what we went through in the 40's."  
But Babe took one look at the menu-plan  
the doctors at the General had devised  
& said "doc, you might as well give me a bullet,  
it would be quicker." But Kate was a trooper  
& she took up swimming & eating kelp.  
Babe had no interest in this, so,  
when Kate was swimming or eating kelp  
Babe was walking out his dismay,  
walking out onto Alligator Alley  
& then his meeting w Earl & their friendship.

Babe Ruth dreams of falling through, the next  
heartattack taking him to a future world  
where ballplayers capable of 20 whacks  
are paid 12 million dollars  
& given a seat in the house of representatives.  
He says the worst things that happens w heartattacks  
is surviving -- choosing to put the pain behind  
& moving on.

"But that is now what I have done.  
Dumb mooch punk doctors -- I've been through it before.  
I have quit the game, Earl. No matter what.  
I can't help the Red Sox  
win the World Series ever again."  
Babe gets a Hinky Hero on the house, a copy of  
USA Today & sleeps in the picnic area,  
Ft. Lauderdale Florida,  
thinking it's ok,  
& he tries to think of his arms  
full of the undoubted might of Hercules  
& his belly oblivious, to his philosopher-gut,  
(do you like italian? chinese?)  
& corking a few out into the night,  
just wracking up the numbers & the nights,  
he tries to think of glory & girls  
but he can't. He hears the traffic, waves  
& thinks of her out on the fray of beach  
crowded w middle-class school kids,  
her shoulders freckling w the sun,  
her hair white white w the bleaching saltiness,  
trying to delay the inevitable, love,  
beautiful, oblivious to the beach-filth,  
thankful for another chance to live forever,  
popping them into the stands.

THE BABYSITTER

The Babysitter

1

Jason Voorhees is on the loose tonight,  
steam pouring off his body: he's painting the broad leaves  
& the tall grass w the hacked pieces of eye-white  
& the pulp underneath the skin.  
The babysitter told me she had it bad when she was a kid.  
There is nothing that can be done: Jason lived in a  
lake, dreaming of plunging his ice-pick  
into whatever wormwood happened to pass-by.  
She said life is full of terrible things,  
ready to be printed up & bought in the aisle.  
He is out on the loose, figuring us for patsies,  
ready to vicegrip all the dogfood out of the metropolis  
& smash all the little bones in our ears.  
She said it then, I hear it now, on the loose.

2

She said the snow plows would come rumbling around  
& plow all the grey street-snow into mountains  
that lined her safe suburban streets.  
& then these snow-blowers would eat the snow banks  
w their huge iron corkscrewing blades.  
& once this kid who liked to play in the banks  
built a hollow in the snow & experimented w cigarettes,  
well, he didn't hear the trucks' elephantine approach  
so he didn't get out of the way of the machine  
& the blower sputtered its soppy contents into a dump truck  
when suddenly, a small blur of red & jagged bone.  
"I saw this," she said. "I saw it w my own eyes.  
Winter isn't just the sheen on a Christmas card, kid.  
Disregard Dean Martin's favorite Holiday songs."



3

We waited & waited for my parents' Gran Torino to leave  
& then she would crank 45's & order pizzas by phone.  
"Yes, you can watch tv shows w serious gunfire  
& drink orange pop until you heave."  
& I would, in equally neon tones, half the night away.  
She would dance the latest steps in the hallway  
& would rip your head off if you ever got the lyrics wrong.  
But so what? It was all nice & 1970's  
but she isn't around & chaos comes again, I guess.  
If I knew where she was I'd drive a motorcycle there  
& say "dig the hog but those stories...I don't know."  
She said so many things, always talking in a raspy  
Demi Moore/Kirstie Alley like voice. I'll never understand  
because half the time I wasn't really listening.

4

She tried stories about punchy, dull pirates bound for New Orleans,  
or about one-armed basketballers,  
but they wouldn't do. Winter howled at the windows,  
& neither of us would watch the eleven o'clock news.  
So w/out much ado she told me the story of her life.  
Once we walked all the way to the nearest Kentucky Fried  
& she told me how once a friend of her friend  
ordered a bucket of the good stuff & there in the middle  
was rat, covered in batter, 11 herbs & spices, southern fried.  
"But it's alright, this Kentucky will be ok" she placated,  
& our feet started to drag on the squeaky packed snow.  
I had never been out so late & we agreed  
that the whole odyssey was a dumb idea  
& the only things we really liked were the gravy, skin & fries.

5

Clifford Olson's son will be able to go to college  
to an American college if he has the grades,  
his wife could buy Levelor - I have nothing against her.  
Terrible! & there are things I can't say,  
that escape because of the source. Butchers  
are just outside the door, ready to end a life,  
get rich, become famous, have a kick.  
Think, in L.A. a man has been going around stabbing  
asking "are you dead yet?" w each lunge.  
Think, in Montreal a policeman shoots a black teenager  
says it was an accident & now he has his job.  
Terrible! There are things I can't say, can't sound.  
& think before you think about not going on, she says,  
because she says things like that when the wretched world pops.

6

Cortina Bob

Despite my bruised hands & missing teeth  
the last word was I'd never make it to the pros  
I was going to be too small, never grow  
much & I should use my head or know the street  
make money dealing grams, looking to meet  
my end the way many of her friends seemed to go  
& if you go that way it becomes too slow  
trying to escape in a gin & tequila roar  
wanting to crawl into the quilt that would  
shut the critics out for as long as hell.  
I too thought eventually about the hitchhiker who disappeared  
& I felt myself fall into a warm sick, so  
the afternoons dragged in a psychedelic well  
& my parents noticed but not too quick.

7

Coffee doesn't do it & neither does the thickest line of the finest Columbian cocaine. O Juan Valdez!

The babysitter knew what was what, she went on & on before I knew anything. Large, w her electric minis blonde arrogance & endless telephone calls.

(There was a guy on the other line much on her mind.)

She had him over & once I stupidly walked in on them, she thought I was asleep, it was in the basement, it smelled like a crankshaft, I knew what was up, & I thought about doing something stupid, drawing attention, but what the hell, there was something on tv, a few potato chips. Next time around she said he wouldn't be coming over; he moved to Toronto, to help build another CN Tower, another City Hall.

8

"Humans can lick hands too!"

She said, adding discursively, she wouldn't eat horsemeat (she didn't like lean meat anyway)

& that some peasants in the Orient went for dogs.

I was trembling after the story thinking I was going to hell because I said terrible things to our dog before he died.

She had just told me the nasty little story about a girl who couldn't fall asleep w/out the reassuring lick of her beloved Spot on her dangling hand.

Next morning, however, written in blood:

Humans can lick hands too! She warned:

"Don't get too attached to Old Shep, whoever, because they go & leave you empty, stupid.

Have your parents drag you to St. Pats one day, pray."

9

BB gun shots outside the window crack, whiffle,  
& they hit their target: bus windows.  
Bus windows crack slowly in a spidery design, crystalize..  
That's how it looks inside I assured her,  
why I keep hurting people. I'm sorry.  
It's all there but it's terribly cracked, sort of beautiful.  
Don't touch or it will fall at your feet.  
"Boo hoo" she said "I once had a boyfriend who acted  
like a jerk, saying things out loud, the spaz,  
always embarrassing me & the people around  
& then this French guy came & beat the hell out of him,  
a beating at the hands of an anonymous French guy,  
quite a popular threat at the time & I thought it could happen,  
so I better be cool & keep it all inside.

10

"Your parents called & they won't be back tonight."  
& they wouldn't which wasn't strange.  
I didn't have brothers or sisters & she said I wasn't missing much.  
She said, behind a cloud of menthol cigarette smoke,  
the only-child grows up to be a Hitler, a talentless overachiever,  
who'll make a million dollars & die young.  
But I was no left-handed Napoleon  
& when she was gone I took to slipping on the ice like the rest.  
I slept in the doorway a few times too  
because I was so worried about the earthquakes  
the babysitter said were due to arrive any day.  
She said she remembered the FLQ crisis & she worried  
her stupid brother would stupidly scrawl FLQ somewhere  
& one of the army boys posted would shoot them both.

11

Before they went out my father would preen in the mirror  
singing like the imaginary Irishman:  
"When Quebec City was Irish  
we were almost out of our minds,  
we came down from the cholera boats,  
we couldn't leave our fights behind.  
The English had their sentries there,  
they spoke French in our church,  
there was little money in the shipping yards  
& in Montreal it was much worse.  
When Quebec became whatever it is  
we were leaving for Boston or New York,  
& there's no trace on the St. Lawrence River  
besides the death words on black rock."

12

& she would just sit there deep in the sofa,  
have me fetch her things from the fridge,  
light her cigarettes etc. & she would pencil out  
drawings of would-be models w thick lashes, tiny waists.  
& then sometimes she'd see something on television  
or hear something on the telephone  
(I wasn't too crazy about her being on the phone all the time)  
& it would upset her so she'd crush those drawings  
into ready-to-pitch crumpled balls  
& bounce them against the living room wall & cry  
a full, ornamented, guttural, wet sob.  
& when I would ask why she did that  
she would sneer "it's crap, jerk, you wouldn't understand."  
I understood enough to never ask why again.

13

My mother on occasion would try to make up for the fact  
that she liked to go out at night so often.  
I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry  
& all the gratuitous guilt, nauseating  
better suited for a creative writing class.  
Jason Voorhees lived in a lake, you know  
turning the ash tree forests of the Catskills  
into a graveyard, meatballs, my friends, o.  
I'm not marrying: maybe I'll love. (cough.)  
It's clearly said on tomorrow's hospital doors,  
in my recent interest in Gospel music:  
I'm not taking calls. Go out & kiss the night air,  
I too find it liberating, it can be paradise.  
How great thou art. Make the world go mad.

14

La Cabane

Fresca drinkers, did you hear? She had red hair  
& said she might be Scottish & used cfc-less hairspray.  
Fresca drinkers, apologize, lay down.  
Fresca fiends, come w me where the sofa has a kind view to the tv  
& we'll donkey the high diddle dee dee  
like tomorrow was a guest spot w Arsenio.  
O ye drinkers of Fresca, w your hair so high,  
who leave your date early for your videotapes  
& take the 5th on the evening, my friends,  
maybe one day I'll grow to sing of Elvis Presley & his chimp  
& why I can't wait until rain washes Montreal cold  
& Novemberizes until I love my life  
& the Waikiki holograms set loose  
into the St. Lawrence street night.

15

First thing you'd notice about me now, Marsha, is I'm  
underweight instead of the balloon you predicted.  
Clematis covers the front of my house &  
krinkle kut potato chips are never in the pantry.  
You see, I'm busy trying to be something else,  
outgrowing each con-job w surprising ease,  
underweight instead of the balloon you predicted.  
After all I can fashion myself to be non-pig,  
fashion myself to be from a different part of the country:  
Toronto, a sort of good healthy anonymity,  
entirely Canadian, not Irish, Scottish or Quebecois.  
Right now, Marsha, I think you wouldn't recognize  
anything: the house is gone, the folks have  
left & I'm not in the streets begging for a  
living -- I was too old for a babysitter, y'know.

16

The babysitter said the last sitting job she had  
somebody kept phoning the place, breathing heavy  
"get out of there or I'll kill you"  
& she phoned the phone company & they traced the call,  
traced it to the extension upstairs.  
Things happen. The parental units would ask too  
if "Marsha did anything strange" when they were gone.  
Of course I said no, fearing they'd stay in  
& try to teach me the way of the world's hunk of pie.  
Cuddle the Kentucky Fried Rat: once, she fell asleep  
on the cool linoleum of the kitchen floor  
I tried to wake her up but she told me just fuck off  
& wound my way back upstairs, shut the door  
& fell asleep w the television on.

17

La Corona

What plays the accordian, the balalaika & waits  
for the end of the world? I don't know,  
but it sure isn't completing its MBA.  
Oh, now that she is gone & so many years,  
I have a few things I probably should say  
& hope it's not as dull as the monsters in the closet  
or a hushed episode of Geraldo. Every drip  
in the month of November will have its day  
& I can't say I feel this way because she's gone.  
I haven't been paralyzed by loss. I fell in love,  
ate good meals, made sturdy plans for the future.  
Taught myself to play basketball & got good enough  
to have my heart broken when I was picked-up last.  
But there is a bite-mark there, no good-byes.

18

There is a bite-mark there, no good-byes.  
& I've wanted to see her, just to say it isn't so,  
none of those things ever happened. But it was over,  
cold, I couldn't stand summer or winter  
all that was good to me was a little bit grey:  
when these postures were shed, less angry,  
I had learned to do things only crazy people do:  
go to movies alone, write letters to the Premier,  
eat spaghetti every day & follow arena football.  
But I knew I'd never see her, despite dreams of one day  
there she is sauntering down Ste. Catherine street  
& I could say hey you, hey Marge, I mean Marsha  
whatever happened to you. I had asked my parents  
& they said they didn't know where she was.



19

They said they didn't know where she was  
& my aunt then would come over, eat ice-cream, tell me to go to bed.  
Nouveau flavors: strawberry shortcake, peanut butter fudge,  
& she would finish the tub. & I watched tv in my room,  
door locked, show about the 2nd World War & the siege of Leningrad.  
I thought I would die there, in 1941, skinny to start w  
I'd have to resort to stealing bread & still collapse in the snow.  
Or stowaway in a truck convoy over frozen Lake Ladoga,  
try my luck in the direction of Siberia -- I'd like Siberia.  
My aunt would still have long grey hair & would eat snow.  
The babysitter of course had th's enormous blonde beehive  
& it would fall down & the spiders & maggots nesting inside  
would be free to rove. & I was afraid of her, after all,  
she said her boyfriend had a pit-bull named Hitler.

20

She said her boyfriend had a pit-bull named Hitler,  
striped orange & black like a Bengal tiger,  
& her boyfriend trained the thing w raw viscera  
as rewards & anybody who crossed her, crossed her boyfriend,  
crossed the dog & there was born a buzzsaw.  
Once she said her boyfriend came home & there was Hitler  
choking on something the dumb animal couldn't bring up.  
So he brought him to the vet who Heimliched the thing  
& up came 3 half-digested human fingers.  
Another vicious killer was hiding out in the house,  
a killer, a psychopath who had something against women.  
Her boyfriend had no sense, no education & that's why  
he gave his dog such a stupid name. Vicious,  
she said when I was old enough I should get a tattoo.

21

She said when I was old enough I should get a tattoo.  
A rugged bear, a hula girl, it really didn't matter.  
Her boyfriend, depending on her mood, rode a Harley  
or attended Brown. Whatever he was he wasn't the boyfriend  
who hung, dangling from above, from an oak tree,  
his feet scratching the car roof rhythmically.  
She stayed in the car because he had warned her.  
She didn't do much: just talked on the phone  
& told me not to set the place on fire again.  
"If you want fried food I'll order it from Julio's."  
Although it didn't matter if I stayed up to watch Frankenstein  
squeeze the life out of some innocent, her boyfriend would get me,  
she said, if I didn't stop saying she was stupid.

22

I didn't stop saying she was stupid  
& when she was gone, I'd be out on the balcony  
calculating the exact days & hours since her disappearance.  
& I'd think, I'd pray, it wasn't my fault  
after all, I persisted in calling her stupid & worse.  
In Memoriam: God has been silent through holocausts,  
the leaves in the Polish forest greened, turned  
& fell, keeping all their natural beauty  
while our brothers & sisters died.  
& I didn't think God would decide then, w me outside  
on the balcony w a runny pup's nose, to end  
the criminal silence, put meat on my arms  
& then I could fight like Kid Galahad, do it all myself,  
fight my way through, bring Hallam, King or Shelley back  
if I wanted to, regardless of what everybody said.

23

Regardless of what everybody said I had to do something  
besides work for Shell Oil & hang out at the Tipperary Arms.  
Of course it didn't work out that way  
but at least I know it's my own fault & have no pity  
at how ripe I am to be taken by the slick Waldorf chef  
who sends me the asked-for-recipe, the "Red Velvet Cake"  
to the tune of \$350, c.o.d. & w an affidavit that starts  
"Dear Wuss. Pay up or I'll sue you to death."  
Gentlemen, ladies, turn your heads while I go on  
about being cooked, being dipped in special dye #2,  
dipped in special sauce, in chili-cheese flavored cheez whiz,  
in lumpy pancake batter, & I can hardly breathe.  
True, embarrassing, possibly a foot-note.  
& none of this is the babysitter's fault.  
She is playing the end of the world on accordion.

24

Michael Jordan -- just forget it.  
He studies entymology he soars so high,  
the spin, the win, the double pumping through the lane,  
the sweetshot, the shake 'n bake, the between the legs  
break & in your face reverse tomahawk jam.  
Bust a move, take it on the chin.  
Michael was cut from his high school team, but  
had the sense to go back to the court & do it.  
I never knew how the babysitter felt about basketball,  
but I know she had a thing for Bobby Orr.  
Maybe wherever she is she is feeling fine,  
better than stoned, thinking that stupid kid  
ought to think about a decent job,  
move to Alaska if that's what it takes.

25

Before they would go out my father would have a drink  
& he would sing like the imaginary Irishman:  
"When Quebec City was Irish  
there was whiskey on the quay,  
as the English called me paddy  
& the French called me tête carée.  
Lost in a frozen country,  
just looking to flee starvation,  
well some stayed & you'll hear it said,  
bonjour, mon vieux M. Ryan.  
So play those drunken jigs & reels,  
may the angels grant your wish,  
my fond friends do you remember  
when Quebec City was Irish."

26

My mother would get to feeling guilty & apologize  
for leaving me alone, for so often, so many nights  
& she talked to me like an old friend  
out on a long forgotten tea.  
"Did I tell you about your Grammy?" she goes  
& I tune out & wonder when she'll leave me be.  
Glaze my eyes around, think of what's on tv.  
The babysitter had a friend whose grandmother was dying  
& she wanted to see the Grand Canyon as her swan song  
but the old bird died on the way, & started to decompose,  
so the family decided to strap her on the luggage rack.  
But the car was stolen in Phoenix, granny & all  
so the joke was on the crooks, those dumb Phoenicians.  
"Did you hear what I said? O look! I'm late..."

27

The basement couch was orange, w vinyl seats  
& fibrous tape over the rips in the arms.  
The tv there was never right: either the screen  
would fuzz over or the cable was out.  
One movie showed acid eating through a hand  
& I would tell my schoolteachers this  
& they wouldn't believe it; they didn't have cable  
& frowned upon it anyway: "it'll rot your brain,  
it'll make you blind, it'll lead you to hell."  
As if doing the police in different voices  
wasn't a simple enough gift.  
The babysitter didn't care for cop shows too much though  
& when I wanted to see my favorite detective  
I'd have to go up to my room & close the door.

28

She said she wouldn't mind taking an RV  
from one end of this continent to another.  
From the Lick-a-Chick stand in Glace Bay N.S.  
to the drive-thru of Bob's Big Boy in L.A.  
& she said if I was older & not such a jerk  
she could see doing this kind of thing w me.  
Her aunt's husband's brother's doctor's wife's friend  
was once apparently driving her RV crosscountry,  
after her husband went to sleep in the back.  
She came to a stop & her husband thought he was home,  
he stepped outside & she took off into the night  
leaving her husband behind in some anonymous stretch  
of highway, underneath the stars, nude,  
seeing how many stars he could see in the Pleiades.

Cordon Bleu

I can't tell you why I eat spaghetti everyday.  
Maybe it would be better to diet on pop rocks  
& like Mikey die on the fatal mix w soda pop.  
It made his belly burst, the poor kid.  
Maybe I'll buy a suit that was treated w formaldehyde  
& it'll seep into my pores & I'll sing of no more.  
Maybe I'll come into league w Satan  
& we will bow to the old Proctor & Gamble logo,  
bless the pale moon & the sharpened knives at our feet.  
& then there will be no need to fear cottonwood snakes  
no doubt lingering in rolled-up carpets at JC Penney  
& until then I'll be doing it every night:  
one pot for the pasta, one pot for the sauce.  
"Before you go to bed, don't forget to turn the stove off."

She said we could make red velvet cake  
as soon as my parents called to say they wouldn't be home.  
The separation of eggs, the folding of mix,  
would take all of our concentration;  
we wouldn't want to be halfway into something  
& have them come in & hoot surprise.  
Did we have cocoa? Red food coloring?  
It's lost. But one thing I do remember  
clearer than anything & that was how she looked.  
The shock of blonde & thick lips so dry in winter  
& definitely not thin.  
Beige sweaters & white blouses almost all the time  
glasses to read w, a super smile  
& she said it all to be kind, & Nannyish.

31

I don't plan to hack some priestly wisdom over you,  
she said, or give you the time of day.  
The first nights she came over, a humid Indian summer  
covered the suburbs w a warm haze & I was a bit crazy.  
She said to me right away: "look, kid, did I ever tell you  
there was this babysitter who had problems  
w this mewling punk of a kid & then one day  
she told the parents how she solved the trouble-maker:  
'I just put the kid's head in the oven  
until he falls asleep & then I turn the oven off.'  
So just be thankful you have me, you're free,  
I'm not going to tell you when to go to sleep or pretend  
I enjoy your Alice Cooper albums whathave-you,  
you are doomed, kid, let's order something in."

32

She said some kinds of catfish could kill you,  
don't ever eat a plate of tainted mud honeys.  
But if you ever get a snootful of the really good stuff  
from the deep blue woods in Tennessee  
it would be the best taste of something you ever had.  
So wait & wade through all the burgers & popcorn  
that will make you what you are.  
Don't eat poinsettias & don't eat the choke cherries  
from the hedges that make suburban Quebec lush.  
Particularly, don't mix them w milk.  
But have all the green M & M's you can stand,  
they will increase you in a way oysters, garlic,  
olives, strawberries, ginseng & vitamin E are supposed to.  
Diet, she said, is the key to future happiness.

34

The nights my parents would stay home weren't so different.  
Sometimes they'd fight, sometimes they'd watch PBS.  
We'd all be there until it was time to send me off  
to do whatever I wanted, just not there in the room.  
Twiddle dee dee. My father had a fancy  
that we would pack up for NY & would say: "Central Park  
is beautiful this time of year" no matter what time of year it was.  
But this was preferable to his threats of private school,  
private Catholic school, private French, Catholic school.  
But it never happened, so pity Lou Gehrig  
& those w Lou Gehrig's disease, not us! We're rich!  
"What did Marsha say? What did Marsha say"  
I would pester & the blue light of their tv,  
the best in our house, gentle on all our faces.

34

She said we might as well be swinging from trees,  
trying to tap ancient songs from the tree trunks.  
There should be something to stop trucks  
from running us over in the afternoon. Something  
to stop cancer, toothless & global heating.  
I wasn't thinking about much besides Jello 1-2-3  
or what were the coolest numbers for hockey. (4-9-16)  
She said her boyfriend had set fire to his parents' place  
& they had to live in this motel by the freeway  
while it was being redone. He was hardly around,  
he had dumped Marsha & taken up w a red-head.  
Meanwhile, his parents would sip cheap brandy & whimper  
about the stink of motel & ghosts on the tv.  
She had a point, you figure, w this folk tale.



35

The babysitter said the last job she had, in Ahuntsic,  
a maniac kept phoning, going "si vous êtes seule,  
dépêchez-vous, je vous tuerai. S'il vous plaît, partir!"  
& so on, & despite his old world politeness  
she phoned the phone company & so on & so on.  
"Did you know that Allo Police photographers show up  
on the scene of a crime 10 minutes before the police commissioner?"  
"Pity all those MIT grads & SAT champs  
who tried to dry their beloved pets in the microwave  
you could imagine the horror." I have imposed on you  
long enough. There are several more discontinuous points  
full of spotty livers, dead cats & capitalism.  
She had an answer alright. She should've been there  
when I fell in love w Mallory Keaton.

36

Corona Extra

Rip off the devil's head & shit down his throat.  
When I wake up tomorrow I'm afraid I won't remember a note,  
how she looked & the way her voice leapt when excited.  
Halfway to hackdom in these memoirs ok  
but don't say she didn't mean everything to me.  
Tonight the wind rattled my windows,  
the only wood frames left on the block.  
All the aluminum converts sent me a letter  
telling me what an eyesore the place has become.  
"Cher Monsieur" it begins ingenuously.  
But I have been shy of refurbishing & renovation  
because who knows when I'll kick to Boston too.  
But I'll love her voice there too: the rap station signal  
is so strong you pick it up on your bathroom pipes & your fillings.

37

I could tell Oprah that I'm an adult & feel sort of hollow  
& she could ask the Dr. in the panel for some common sense  
& then she could turn to the wisdom of the audience  
& they'll say they find it hard to swallow  
that I've never been to Chicago & still feel sort of hollow.  
Oh, it's been done before, done to a char, done to death,  
done to the tune of "Try a Little Tenderness."  
I'd thank Oprah & her audience & just try to follow.  
I'd sing the chorus, I'd go "we are fam-i-lee"  
& NBC-TV could put me in their Thursday slot  
& I'd tell all the tales she once told me  
& w the laugh track I'll dig a slapdash plot  
& like the vanishing hitchhiker, I'll be free.  
this isn't a talk show, just some more spaghetti.

38

She advanced the idea that in death there's a sweetness,  
like apples that eventually fall to the ground,  
good for jam, jelly & sauce. Otherwise it's all  
wracked faces & knotted insides. Jason Voorhees  
would go along, the dew stink of his farmer's pants,  
the lake sludge stuck to his brown scars,  
& blood congealing on his macheté blade,  
looking for anything that smelled of teenage riot.  
She said don't believe the hype, go to business school.  
Don't buy pets in Mexico, don't believe the punk rocker  
w the spiked green hair in the poor donut shop  
ate your missing donut. Maybe you put it in your bag.  
Don't make sauce out of what will easily be yours;  
in Montreal in NYC, don't be afraid.

39

Too old for a goddamned babysitter I protested till blue.  
But it passed & now's the time to consider liposuction  
& transferring my RSP's into more corporate bonds.  
The babysitter still hovers around in a misty backseat,  
a killer in her own right, ready to render lives  
tabloid ready w blood. She owes nothing!  
Love still smacks around the palaces  
& lurks awkward & glorious in the pigpen of hearts,  
wild, if the RCMP is tapping your telephone;  
I hope it was something embarrassing & your posse is ready.  
"He played her like he played a Stradivarius",  
Joan Collins, novelist, has unfortunately written.  
But it too will sort of pass, become another monster  
pouring ooze from its open sores, uncured.

40

Winterized, Scotch-guarded, waterproofed --  
it is still impossible to repel the heavy stains.  
To mill wheat & rye, hoe fields, prune trees,  
until unexplained stuff gets under your nails  
& then drop w/out notice, that's what heaven is for.  
California! I bet it's like California,  
sunny all the time, blooms in December.  
The babysitter is gone, ho hum, Jerusalem.  
Jason Voorhees is out on the prowl,  
his rhinoceros knees impervious  
to the self defending hacks of any kid who can grasp a weapon.  
He is coming towards us all for no reason  
ready to slash out any teenage shame  
until the fields again are red w blood.

NEW YEAR'S EVE

"The darkness of New Year's Eve descended on a scene filled not with the sound of music but with the cries of wounded men calling for help."

- Description of the Battle  
of Stones River (Murfreesboro)  
Dec. 31 - Jan. 2 1862

I Met This Singer

I met this broken singer, from a famous Irish band,  
his teeth pushed-in & blackened,  
his voice abrasive as Ajax.  
He wore a ragged beard  
& dark glasses that wiped out the light,  
& he kept the things closest to him  
closest to his face:  
a crystal tumbler of clear liquor  
& a pack of Taryton 100's.  
I met this musician at the Ramada Inn Hotel  
in Montreal Quebec for a price-management seminar  
w my shallow buddies, my co-workers,  
all of us in discount suits, for the firm.  
I was away from my wife, my songs & Toronto.  
He laughed like a devil as we bellied up to the bar,  
said he might go for some Poulet Frit à la Kentucky  
but went for the double gin martini instead.  
We talked for a little, I didn't know what to say,  
I heard he was some kind of genius  
who held Behan's ghost in his pocket  
& his words were like taking the ferry in the rain.  
He talked about Charlie Parker & offered cigarettes.  
The pressboard, instant-chic of the lounge  
was still working: it looked classy,  
like a leather & mahogany power-cocktail repose  
instead of the grogstop  
of another Ramada Inn Hotel. Car lights  
knifed at the big tinted windows,  
a combo indelicately thumped jazz,  
I felt I was riding a big white wave,,  
ocean spray on my nape, & I could just wave  
to the surf-God-loving throng.  
He was polite, kind, mumbly, European: short & thin.  
His nubby smile; he didn't care  
that I was old or my suit was tight, off the rack.  
His eyes gleamed as I talked about writers,  
about writing songs in my basement  
& the dreary attempts to save a relationship.  
In spurts & groans like the rodomontade  
of a ballplayer shrivelled by the sun.  
I told him I had a stack of songs in the basement  
& I heard he was some kind of Joyce or Carolan.  
I elbowed a beer off the bar, accidentally,  
& caught it before spilling a drop & said  
I could've made it to the pros.  
He had more martinis, dry as adobe I suppose,  
& started swirling his head  
like an enthralled figure skater  
about to go for a fall.  
His friends from London came up to him,

& he clammed up & scribbled some private notes  
on Ramada Inn napkins.  
I let my drink get warm,  
warm as my palm, undrinkable, & I tried to catch  
a glimpse of the scene in the glasses  
hanging upside down above the bar.  
We were just guys w bad haircuts in an unknown town,  
barnacles to barstools, w/out girls.  
They all spoke in those British Isles mumbles  
& miraculously understood each other.  
I listened to the jazzbands wind down inconclusively.  
I looked for my co-workers.  
But deep inside, in the muddiest part of my gut,  
I wanted to tell that singer something,  
something that was the truth long lodged within  
& maybe once I spit that out, I'd feel free.  
Like pure hydrogen released from all the lesser,  
afterthought elements, like water or gold,  
I would rise up & up. So light, so light.  
I wanted to say something I held in for years.  
& saying it I hoped would be a drug,  
a drug w/out pill or slop  
that induced homeostasis until I became  
whole once again.  
I wanted to say yes it was me, maybe you heard,  
I was the man who drove the car  
Hank Williams died in, New Year's Day 1954,  
that was me, the young chauffeur  
with those cold bones in his back seat,  
all the way from Knoxville TN to Oak Hill WV;  
hypodermics, bottles, doctors.  
I didn't & I didn't, I just sat around, lumpous.  
I didn't say a thing  
I say, tight with the bottom-feeding whiskered-ones  
who are in the silty waters back there still rolling on.

In M. Dreams

I make Hank Williams drink sulphuric acid,  
smelling of the worst industry  
& bubbling yellow & after he downs it,  
I endeavour to make him sing or say  
with his granulated vocal chords  
"I'll have another one, sir, o please!"  
& he lives on like a vulcanized scar  
ready to impress its old hurt upon you.  
& I drive in my dreams  
again into the dark mountains of West Virginia  
where coal fires grey the skies  
of the little mining towns,  
a thermos of oversteeped tea by my side,  
& somewhere along the way I miraculously come through  
-- through to a kind of heaven --  
where Hank Williams has disappeared, it's warm,  
& the radio plays hope in Reggae/Calypso  
"Again the sun / each day & new & new & new."  
The gearshifting becomes feathery & I speed  
until there's blankness on the horizon,  
a feeling there's an ocean nearby.  
A sea that roars, pops & drags the shore  
w its millions of broken particles,  
& the sunshine again tears me through.

In the morning I do what I do without thinking,  
I get to work ready, clean, caffeined,  
& think how did I manage to do all that:  
get out of bed, dress & drive --  
why didn't I just toss it  
& watch the shopping network all day?

Sometimes there's no history, just madness,  
& there's nothing we can say,  
it's not working out, love,  
I can't communicate. She is at work  
before I'm even up. It's the worst.  
Frost pastes over the windows,  
the de-humidifier rattles like an old car  
& I wonder if we are together at all.  
Love too stops & starts, stalls.  
You read the papers & die a little bit.  
A highway collapses in an earthquake,  
a famine reoccurs, there's a kind of AIDS  
that housecats can get, while in LA  
the Bloods & Crips go head to toe  
in a whorl of rock-smoke & gunfire.  
It's felt in every corner of the continent.  
Hamburgers for lunch. A phone call. I love you.  
In my dreams I'm Bruce Lee with natchukos  
trying to knock all the alcoholic pride out  
of Hank Williams, but with every knock

& every kick that comes from the dragon heart  
the gaunt little man comes up with his guitar  
galvanized & sings "When the time comes for me  
to lay down & die  
I guess I'll have to go & hire  
someone to cry" --  
& slugs from his pint  
so cold, so cold.



This is One of the Songs from the Basement

"The Ballad of Eddie Cohen"

This is the ballad of Eddie Cohen,  
a young pen-pal of poet Sylvia Plath,  
who drove all the way from Chicago to Boston  
to meet his love at long last.

When he came to her doorstep  
she was surprised to see not words but a face  
unshaven, unkempt, weary w travel,  
& she was cold & put him in his place.

Sylvia's mother thought he was just some guy,  
not the Eddie with the sensitive pen,  
so she too was standoffish & dismissive:  
there'd be no room in the house for him.

So, Eddie got in his car & left the suburbs  
& drove into the black heart of downtown.  
He took a hotel & he met with a girl  
who just wanted to fool around.

In the morning Eddie felt like a dog  
& still mad at what happened with Plath,  
too sour to stay & try again.  
He paid up his bill, said it was in the past.

Eddie drove too fast,  
his mind on the letters  
that once meant so much to him --  
why did she treat him like gravel?  
Would he ever speak to her again?

But somewhere around Ohio  
Eddie had an accident, a head-on w a truck,  
but he lived to see his friendship fizzle  
less dramatically, & that was his luck.

### The Trip

The trip was supposed to be simple enough:  
drive Hank Williams from Knoxville TN to Canton OH,  
give him time to dry out, straighten up  
for a New Year's Eve concert the next night.  
But I had to bring the car from Montgomery AL,  
the first capital of that confederacy, 1861,  
where Jim Crow ruled supreme as cotton, 1954,  
& where blood was spilled not thirty years ago  
for daring to cast a vote, sit anywhere on a bus.  
I had to take the first cadillac cowboy's cadillac  
all the way through the Smoky Mountains  
& through a heavy wet snow  
that grounded all the planes.

I was to take him wherever he wished.  
& Ole Hank (he annoyingly referred to himself  
in third person) wanted to go on  
just another wild ride.

He needed some shots for the pain in his back  
which was real at one time, but that day  
he was riding the crest of a junkie's heat,  
a hot spell that eats the user like a fever  
from fix to fix until, someday, it dies down.  
First business in Knoxville was to see  
the doctor who would oblige Ole Hank.  
Instead of starting north  
we tooled around the south in the white caddy.  
A dusty bottle of whisky from Fort Payne AL  
was soon shattered, empty on the road. Then, then, then  
we got to Chattanooga TN to see another doctor  
another needle that I guess he couldn't  
brave himself to spike.

Picked up some chloral hydrate tablets -  
something to keep him from drinking  
(you kept Hank from drinking by knocking him out).

The mountains were grey in the snow  
but still missing the Christmas magic  
Dolly Parton has associated w the region.  
Traveling through you could never tell  
throughout these fields, stench;  
wounds left to fester on the battlefields;  
gangrene, osteomyelitis, pyemia, peritonitis,  
dysentary, typhoid, pneumonia, malaria  
& of course just plain shot to death,  
like Lincoln. Just passing through  
you wouldn't know. God is silent that way.  
Hank had a guitar back there  
& now & then he'd manage a few stray strums,  
or an out-of-tune chorus to "I saw the light."

The guitar was so big in his scrawny lap,  
so sharp in its angles,  
it looked like it might mangle him  
like a big greasy machine.  
I tended, even then, mostly to be disgusted  
at the extent of his illness,  
his Jack Daniels emaciation,  
where you could see too clearly  
the bony machinations of the lower jaw,  
& his teeth always exposed,  
brown w tobacco tartar, his lips  
deprived of any healthy puff of fat.  
But it was true:  
he could sing your ass off,  
sing you to the very brink of the country western  
understanding of the world.

He wasn't the first to burn out his or her star,  
& he won't be the last. He had spinabifida  
& a talent for expressing loneliness,  
maybe more than anybody before.  
& for the longest time those songs,  
so plaintive yet so sweet, nestled  
in the deepest parts of my day-to-day.  
Made me afraid to reach out,  
seized up my knees like an ill-advised surgery  
that replaced slippery cartilage  
with rusty sheet metal & pins.  
"Are you ok, Mr. Williams?" I asked  
& he cussed & took a slug & said  
"Ole Hank's alright" & we slid along,  
the cadillac smooth as a skiff in the bayou,  
silent, watching the grey winter forests of Tennessee,  
way into the southern ridge of the Appalachian plateau  
over the muddy tributaries, catfish thick,  
of the Mississippi & Ohio rivers.  
Jesus was on my mind, his mercy  
wouldn't bring us through the snowfall, would it?  
Jesus wouldn't bring us through --  
through to that place like heaven  
& by dawn we were in Chattanooga & Hank  
saw his man & limped into the car  
w another head-full of bootsauce.  
He is coming.  
To Chattanooga where the rebels pitched well  
but disastrously lost the battle of Chickamauga,  
Yankees storming their position on Missionary Ridge,  
chanting, Chickamauga! Chickamauga!  
& Grant's men forced General Bragg into Georgia  
Nov. 25 1863, demoralizing the CSA,  
the blood of the young in the creeks,  
smell of gunpowder in the fog, a huge  
American flag raised at the top of the hill.  
Yessir that doctor fixed Hank up pretty good  
& gave me some little white things  
that would keep me wide awake well into northern OH.

By the time we got back to where we started,  
behind schedule,  
already intolerably weary of driving,  
the car stank of malt  
& Hank needed more than a day to straighten up.  
More than a decade.  
I saw Knoxville again,  
the first time I left my wife in 1984,  
& it was incredible, host of the World's Fair,  
& I took in the humidity like a tonic  
& lay around drunk just about anywhere.  
Knoxville too was occupied by Union troops  
in the autumn of 1863 & they resisted  
any & every attempt to oust them.  
I asked Hank if he wanted to stop here,  
pretend all the night was a dream  
& start again fresh,  
maybe drive into a snowbank for fun.  
But he said no & made gestures with his hand  
as if to say: not now, Ole Hank  
is busy making music history.  
"I will you you (sic) still & always will  
but that's the poison we have to pay"  
is what the wreck coughed out in the back,  
his last contribution to the lyric.  
Snow, let it, powerful, drop heavy.  
From then on, he said, I was the boss  
& let loose & drove North East  
& we were pulled over by this Tennessee cop.

Who snarled at the room-sized sedan  
"Hey, 'bama boy" he said, looking at my plates  
"that's one lawwng car. Who's in back?"  
That's all he wanted to know.  
He was only there because of the snow  
to watch traffic through the Virginia/Tennessee border  
where, by the way, Ulysses S. Grant,  
a reported boozehound & certain military victor himself,  
seized the Virginia & Tennessee rail-lines  
in the first serious offensives of 1864,  
more dead, of course, both sides. Afternoon.  
"Hey, if that guy is Hank Williams  
that guy looks dead", the cop said  
& caught some thick flakes in his meaty palm  
& licked them like a clumsy bear cub.  
& we drove on into the thick Allegheny forest,  
into those beautiful blue pines, & mudslick hollers.  
Into Bluefield Va., an unremarkable town,  
except Mr. Williams had a doctor there  
whom he said he'd like to see,  
but passing through, Hank was passed out,  
the chloral nitrate, the whachamacallit I thought,  
& stopped & had a sandwich by myself  
dry roast beef, & a heart warming beer.

I had another & another until i was pestering  
the waitress, saying, "didja know  
Hank Williams is this bigtime Dodgers fan"  
because the waitress admitted she liked Brooklyn too.  
'& every year he gets choked when the NY Yankees  
best them in the end, those Bums." Oh, O.  
Hank never saw them play w Jackie Robinson  
but he heard of him hustling out in AAA  
for the Montreal Royals  
at gentle Delormier fields not far from the  
foot of the Jacques Cartier bridge.  
In the end she wasn't impressed.  
She turned off the grill.  
Late night, had to travel slow through the snow,  
Hank looked really bad.  
We would never make the New Year's show.  
I didn't want to find out.  
I threw some take-out in the backseat,  
a white paper bag that was never opened.  
I thought I heard him stir when we started out  
& if he had any life then  
I'm sure he was thinking about the beer I bought,  
the new life inside the long white cadillac.  
I think it was full of songstuff.  
I guess he didn't stir, passed through Princeton WV  
& we were close to the limit of Confederate excursions.  
WV was quickly incorporated into the Union.  
I was thinking we were just nitwits travelling  
but 40 miles north I realized,  
it was obvious, Hank Williams was dead.  
Tony Bennett's version of "Cold Cold Heart"  
would no longer rouse him to violence.  
I stopped in Oak Hill WV to tell somebody  
there was a dead man, cold, in my car, his car,  
whatever. & they came & said I was right  
Hiram Williams was dead at the age of 30.  
Police headquarters, telephone calls.  
Excessive eulogies flowed from then on,  
from people who wouldn't shake a hand before  
& who looked on while the last stage of illness set in.  
"The Hillbilly Shakespeare" they said,  
which is only as accurate or inaccurate  
as calling the Bard the Renaissance Hank.  
Schubert, it seems, is the logical parallel,  
but it too doesn't matter, I'm tired  
& I don't know what to say anymore.  
Oak Hill WV, hundreds of miles south,  
(too late, anyway) from the Canton OH promised land.  
Canton OH, site of the Pro Football Hall of Fame,  
Mike Ditka's jersey there in a football shaped building.  
Just north of Salinville, the Northernmost point  
of any rebel excursion: Greycoat calvary raiders  
under General Morgan surrendered there July 26 1863.  
Although, once, St. Alban's VT was raided  
by about 30 Confederates from their base in Canada.

Blackened Roadfish

If the holidays find you on the highway,  
hungry as any old Hank,  
I'll share my recipe for blackened roadfish.  
Put a filet of any type of fish you wish  
in a double wrap of aluminum foil  
w oil, much cayenne, salt & pepper  
& put it securely on your radiator manifold.  
If you're leaving, say Regina, it'll be ready  
by the time you hit the outskirts of Saskatoon.  
No need to stop at McDonalds,  
no more cheeseburger slop on your lap.  
Joyeux Noël. I keep not feeling well.

Somebody I hadn't spoken to for years phoned & said  
"The guitar to me is like a woman"  
& this frightened me, so I hung up.  
Hung my head, schlepped upstairs, watched the Flintstones  
& figured Fred a hell of a Dino-Operator  
still together, after all, w red-haired Wilma.  
This too frightened me, so I ordered egg-salad  
on wheat toast from room service.  
Each method of egg cookery  
an expression of drunkenness: boiled, poached, fried.  
Oh eggstravagant eggcellence! Eggstoll  
your virtues, your vittles  
& recognize again that (1) I am  
powerless.  
After the snack I felt good enough  
to dream of the big win in Atlantic City  
on the Alex Keaton black jack system,  
Laurie Carr, Laura Richmond by my side.  
& once that phantom scattered  
I felt even better that I could go home.

Love, welcome me through  
this droop of yellow gills, this bearish spit,  
this roadside snack of despair  
ready for yet another year.

Pilgrimage

I don't want to give her short shrift  
& if I could tell her story I'd do it now,  
assured it had the nihilism I look for.  
But in shorthand, my wife  
never knew about the Hank Williams story.  
She knew I was from the South, though,  
& once we got in the car  
w the half baked idea we'd drive down to Tennessee  
& there I might expose my terrible genesis.  
A pilgrimage to the bumpy roads  
I plowed through on one pitiful New Year's Eve.  
She said we could camp out, get close.  
She let her hair grow very long.  
We drove out of Toronto w/out a real plan.  
It was too long a drive not to have a clue,  
& she conjured up images of the Klan,  
the ignorance & poverty that blights  
the part of America Canada is  
relatively shielded from.  
This frightened us  
& we never made it past the border.  
Bug detritus covered the windshield  
& when wiped it formed a fine grey film.  
Sometimes it's better to find a motel  
& have hot sex, than to retrace  
the stages of life that recall your pain.  
We were tired though & took a motel near Chatham  
that smelled of sawdust & an oyster bar.  
We watched cable tv, had a few terrific fights.  
The night sky smelled of gasoline.  
She wanted to go out,  
have a drink at this roadside imitation  
of a Hard Rock Café in this middle of nowhere.  
So we had a few more fights & went out.  
The bar had a stage fringed w red plastic shag  
that glimmered like oversize xmas tinsel,  
& there was tin foil instead of mirrors  
behind the bar.  
We weren't the only people there,  
but there were a few on the dance floor.  
She wanted to dance, but I was too tired.  
I was mad that we were out in Chatham.  
I sat at the bar & she skipped to the floor.  
She danced a batwing flapping type dance  
that made me question our difference in age.  
Her hair an uncontrollable brush fire of blonde  
that would for as long as it would, rage  
like the love in her eyes, her eyes, her eyes.  
I couldn't keep up: I'm an old fart,  
a geek, a nerd, a wiener, a dork.

If cut I might bleed polyester plaid  
or something I just don't want her to see,  
a red raw vulnerability  
that never seeps from any color collar,  
it's just on too tight.  
I don't know if I did the right thing.  
She danced to the stuff too real too fast.  
"Not a damn yodeller in the bunch."  
I thought that was that, no more Hank Williams,  
no more lovesick blue cadillac conventions,  
no more making necklaces out of kidney stones.  
I watched my little blur of a mate, a sylph,  
dance while I had something special to drink.  
Watched her dance w some other guys  
& didn't care, really, there was something  
true & undeniable about her dance.  
Like a dumpling I just sat there,  
like an idiot I just watched.



This is Another Song From the Basement

"Hank Williams, You've Pissed on Me for the Last Time"

Hank Williams, you've pissed on me for the last time,  
been walking in the rain until I'm half blind  
& she's crying in a motel room just off Interstate 89,  
she's writing to her mother saying  
she was just being cruel to be kind  
& it's falling & I just want to say I love her  
but I'm busy losing my mind.

I hear that Oprah Winfrey is doing a show I should see  
about people who deaden their feelings just to say they're free  
of some unnamed anger that wriggles down below  
& how it hurts the people around them.  
O Lord if they would only know,  
I'd be with her, kissing her all night long  
& never have to sit & watch that show.

& Jesus Christ is w me in the 7-11 line  
saying: take it easy pardner & you'll be doing fine,  
& I say: but lord of lords what can I do about  
about my woozy head & my wife?  
He says: just pay the man for your jerky  
& go day to day w life.  
So I believe in a rainstorm of sorrow,  
I can come back round again.

This ain't no midnight train,  
this ain't no mystery train,  
this ain't no train to San Antonio --  
it's just walking in the rain,  
Ole Hank, I know you're dead  
& I hope you're doing fine,  
so don't get offended when I say:  
Hank Williams you've pissed on me for the last time.

I Told This Singer

I told this singer from the stumblebum Irish band  
the bare bones of my history,  
how I got to the lobby of Montréal's Ramada Inn Hotel.  
"Yeah, I'm from the states but I live in Toronto.  
I'm married & plunk a bit on the guitar."  
He said my business associates were around somewhere,  
he thought they were heaving up  
into the dark winter streets.  
I told him I didn't get to see many concerts  
but took my wife to see a group called the Violent Femmes  
& she had an ok time, but I fell asleep.  
& I'd come home from this convention  
w nothing off my chest, no epiphany,  
no sticking resolutions though I tried,  
but maybe a bad hangover.  
In Nashville tonight kids are listening to Paula Abdul  
& are excited about the return of the Rolling Stones.  
"Not a damn yodeller in the bunch."  
In the hollers of the Appalachians  
hogs run wild through abandoned cars,  
teen brides raise families in mobile homes  
& guys earn a few extra bucks at the chicken pit.  
Poverty licks at the hand of each corner there,  
girls marry at 15, men die at 30,  
their lungs black & infected from the mines.  
There is no doubt that guilt, however  
moist & unpleasant, is preferable to dirt farming.  
It's a luxury to be a Hank Williams fan  
downtown Toronto, children, marriage, imperfect.  
But still I sometimes hear his ghost yapping,  
implying it was my fault,  
that I shouldn't get complacent,  
I was there.

This Song Will Go Down to the Basement

"Ramada Inn"

I met w Shane MacGowan at the Ramada Inn Hotel,  
drunk on gin martinis, looking like hell,  
he asked me if my friends were going to puke in the streets.  
I told him no they weren't & I bought another drink.  
Then Malcolm started shouting  
& had them talk to Jim in Oakville on the phone  
& I talked to an actress who was in the soaps.  
Mike's eyes were glassy, I was nearly sick  
while short-haired ugly groupies made eyes at the little micks.

We sat around a table  
until the jazz band said goodnight,  
drank our fill & then some --  
we were a bloody fright.

Shane said tell me what kind of music are the bloody Violent Femmes  
"They're just some rock & rollers," I go & he says "are we like them?"  
Malcolm asked a million questions  
until Spider Stacey said fuck off.  
Shane fell asleep a little in his beard  
& the short-haired ugly groupies said he was lost.  
Drank until I could stomach no more, the boys felt it too,  
singing in the cozy bar any songs that we knew  
& it all came to a crashing end  
when Spider up & hauled off on Shane  
for something that he mumbled  
about Public Enemy that made him go insane.  
The security from the Ramada then asked us to leave,  
so we went & gobbled some late night Deli fare  
& passed out thinking this I can't believe.

New Year's Eve, Times Square 1987

New York City all of a sudden felt conquerable,  
like it was a ship-in-a-bottle  
& if we felt like it we could dash it  
& for one night the tail could wag the dog,  
& miracles! -- the regrets of a year would be lost  
in the neon brights, that spin, pop & drag  
all along the square. No bourbon on the plane,  
a guitarcase full of songs, off to see an industry man,  
in a tall 5th avenue building, O he wore a CEO's Armani suit.  
He scoffed at the lyrics, all about puking & hell,  
& said I should write about things I don't know:  
about girls from Jupiter who love until you turn silver,  
or about candy, love, rubies in sunlight,  
California, macrobiotic parties in the desert & designated drivers.  
Maybe. Times Square hotels make you itchy,  
Times Square people always asking for spare change.  
People pass-out  
or cry.

Times Square, on New Year's Eve anyway,  
simple, stupid, a year of accumulated broken glass  
shimmers in the street like very cold snow.  
Hank Williams would be 64,  
he'd be writing a hard-edged ballad  
about his upcoming first social-security check:  
"When all is done & told  
it ain't the worst way of being called old."  
Don't believe anything I say, it's a sequel,  
some rub-off tattoo with the wisdom of Celtic spit.  
But I was there, I'm sure,  
cooking up resolutions like there was no tomorrow.  
Now there'll be no more of that.  
James Brown in prison, Elvis still dead,  
there is no cure for cancer.

I Travel

I travel for a living, out of Toronto,  
drive, never use firearms,  
watch the moonlight limp over the lake ripples,  
& quote Isiah:

"We are throwing away our old,  
destroying our young to glorify  
the media gratification of being 20-25."  
She says to me before I leave, "Charlie,  
it's hard to tell when you're telling the truth.  
Have you found somebody you like more?

& I shrug in the usual way, saying

"I travel for a living: there's nothing wrong."

Drove to Winnipeg once, a beautiful cold,  
& there I felt as paralyzed & old as ever.  
All I do is think of the freeze of Jan/Feb  
& then I rationalize I should be eating  
Popeye's extra spicy extra crispy fried chicken  
off the Gulf Coast in a premature act of retirement.

A nice place to sit back & have a stroke.  
The slick backs of dolphins to be sighted  
from the lazy rented terraces of beery yachts,  
up & away, slipping from the grasp  
of any yellow-eyed conceit, or any Hank Williams.  
Fishheads! She waits at home, wherever,  
she doesn't answer the phone.

Dreams of her hands crumbling like a freeze dried bone  
& her heart tumbling, banging like rocks  
thrown in the dryer.

Jesus's mercy is dashed.

If we get together

I will be plasticene in a claymation rescue,  
where she plays director, actor, clairvoyant,  
& I park the car in the driveway & admit, really,  
le mise-en-scène, c'est moi. My fault, your turn etc.

Dishonesty is the tiger's tail,  
is the way I get to be too busy to say.

Deproof Acapulco's tequila, demystify  
the legends of Cu Chulainn,  
smoke no clove cigarettes

& I promise, promise again. It wasn't me,  
it was my imaginary friend Blinky  
who thinks he's having a good time.

Nolo contendere, wearing a mother-of-pearl bolo  
I march into Texas & let it fly.

Blinky? Anyway, I still never told her  
I drove Hank Williams through a snowstorm,  
through four states & I never told her,  
even though nothing shocks her,

(she once did catalogue lingerie ads  
& sang lead in a band.)  
She is committed to the relationship,  
however damaged, & moving on.  
I travel for a living, Hank.  
This is a make-believe Paris  
situated in the middle of Paris  
which only makes it worse.

Museum Piece

Feeling dizzy I saw violet flashes all around  
& the neon of the roadside attraction cycloned  
until sweat beaded over my face  
hard as pearls & ice blackness conked me out  
dead into rows & tables of souvenirs.  
This was the Hank Williams Jr. Museum at Music Row  
in Nashville TN. I was a tourist, 1984,  
no guitar in the backseat, no mention  
to my family that I'd be gone at all.  
The Junior museum is a quarter acre barn  
full of wholesale consumer detritus:  
cards, thimbles, tractor caps,  
licence plates, cassettes, confederate flags,  
& glossies of Hank Jr, little Bocephus.  
(They say he broke his face in a mountaineering  
accident: lost his looks in that holler,  
came back with a black beard to cover the scars  
dark eyeglasses, & big new teeth,  
his voice funny from the denture work,  
he came to rock, saying "don't call me Jr"  
& had some rowdy days w electric guitar.)  
He keeps a little display at his museum,  
for an extra \$2 US, pictures of his famous  
lonely, tortured old man in a white cowboy hat.  
For a few dollars more, photos enlarged,  
Hank looking gaunt, Hank looking pale,  
Hank looking harried, Hank half dead.  
& somewhere in there a suit, pressed & stapled,  
yellow at the creases, behind glass.  
The suit he wore that New Year's Eve.  
Back in the foyer, in the souvenir bins  
was when I started to spin about.  
I always knew something like that would happen.  
What kind of museum was this?  
How do I sign the Register? "I wanted to die."?  
Blood, catarrh, marrow,  
Ole Hank you old bastard,  
you sure can turn a man's day around.  
There was nothing I could do about my tumble.  
I was in the middle of it, strapped in  
until it reached its conclusion:  
spillin' cheap merchandise, a tableful  
of awful aunt jemima salt & pepper shakers,  
crunching beneath me.  
I wouldn't have minded to slip a bit  
into the steel clean of the other side  
but some good young guys helped me out instead.  
Woke up again & again. A couch in a room  
around the neighbourhood of Vanderbilt U, feeling  
old as you like, & thankful the police

had not met up w me. I thanked the kid  
who had coffee & told me to get out  
because friends were coming over with girls.  
Maybe they beat me up. Maybe I had no money.  
I walked through some suburban slopes,  
pretty good for wear, 103° heat in the morning  
& Nashville looked ready once again  
for a day of taco-stands, beer stores  
& driving. I was just a tourist then.  
A few moments of unmonsterdom,  
I felt like taking a taxi & going somewhere  
to get my hair cut  
& I did & the barber said he'd seen it all,  
heard all the moonshine war stories,  
all the dumb goats knocking horns,  
& when I talked a bit about Hank  
he said he had been to Vietnam, shutup.  
Hank's mansion in Nashville was in disrepair,  
up for sale to be made into a museum.  
& it's right beside the Barbara Mandrell museum  
where you get a free hat w admission.  
It was a long drive back:  
I had no idea whether I'd get through my front door.



A Few Stray Strums

Ok, look like a hell-bag on the subway  
back to that part of the suburbs,  
reflection curls in the see-thru plastic  
that covers advertisements.  
Everybody is getting theirs & more.  
Perfect teeth & perfect navels.

Cold December afternoons in the suburbs,  
crisp, cloudless, a fine mist crawling  
along the rooftops of the delicate bungalows:  
no flags, no tall buildings, no radio towers in view,  
we are all the way out here, together, alone.  
It's snappy.

I'm glad offices are banning mistletoe.  
Although I'm the first to overestimate the value of a friend,  
I never know when to make an offer of uninvited endearment.  
Christmas happens, a few laughs, & goes.

Another bite of peanut butter chili.  
The moon-face of a deathmask,  
the pyrrhic victory of New Year's Eve,  
the skeleton charm of the rake,  
the buffaloes drinkhound singer,  
it's still around here,  
it hurts, it's hard work & it's the truth.  
Meet my family.  
Toronto, Ontario, 1991.

THE FACTS OF LIFE GIRLS' FACTORY

The Facts of Life Girls' Factory

The Argument.

In the dead of the summer of 1991, Blair Warner, the 29 year old heiress and executrix of the Warner Textiles and Warner Industries fortunes, banded together with the girls she grew up with, at an abandoned factory in Peekskill NY, a small college town north of the city by the Hudson. After a hostile take-over of Mattel Inc. Blair Warner found herself responsible for initiating a new direction for one of the outdated but beloved products of the world's largest toy manufacturer. In this desolate part of town, Jo Polnyczek, Tootie Ramsay and Natalie Green along with Blair all ponder the implications in the Warner Industries CEO's directive. The narrative and verse recounts this meeting and guesses at some of its reasons.

There is a Quarter

There is a quarter of Peekskill so grey  
it remains undiscovered  
by the academy boys & private school girls  
on the other side of the river.  
200 acres of grey  
elephant sides in overcast skies,  
the dull grey that rings pigeons,  
or old wool Red Sox uniforms,  
200 acres of factories:  
of 2-storey sweatshops that pay  
                                minimum wage.

They make everything there  
from metal guards for shoelace eyes  
to watermelon-flavored candv-floss

Everyday at four  
a steam whistle fills the quarter  
w its sharp freighter's blow  
that almost rips out the ear canal  
& announces that work is done.  
Women file out the main gates,  
little older women in pink & white smocks  
smoking cigarettes, getting into Japanese cars,  
waiting for buses,  
to take them wherever it is they live.  
At night the quarter is barren  
as a neutron-bombed suburb.  
Occasionally, a security guard's mock cop-car  
rolls quietly through, flashlights at hand  
ready to expose some insurance-fraud scam  
or somebody trying to get even  
w the Warners.

Rats scatter alongside the wet brick  
of the factory walls  
& the July air thick, lockerroomish:  
puts everything in the small town  
                                into slow motion.

Blair Surveys the Empty Factory

Blair surveys the empty factory at night.  
How impossibly quiet it seems.  
Just flip a switch & the place goes nuts.

This is the place, the only place  
                                in North America  
where Barbie dolls are made,  
where those languid limbs of plastic  
can boast 'made in the USA.'

Right in front of Blair is the machine  
that pops Barbie's head  
right onto her prodigious body.  
Pop! like a champagne cork,  
like a finger in a cheek.  
Pop! like the last Rice Krispie dude,  
magnified, aurally, one thousand times.

One thousand little blondes ready for the prom.

The floor manager asks Blair  
what she has planned  
& furthermore what was she doing for dinner.  
Did she like Szechwan?  
So Blair flips her long blonde hair  
& w an Ivy League giggle & snort says  
"What on earth will you married men do  
when your invitations are finally accepted?"  
& she steadfastly told him, baby,  
to just keep the Barbies coming  
& to clear the employees out.

(The factory is dark at the corners, filthy.  
"This isn't either  
Taiwan, South Korea, Hong Kong or Japan"  
Blair says disgusted once again at the dirt.)

Tootie Sits

Tootie sits in the back of the Ramsay limo,  
every luxury her parents earned  
at her fingertips;  
she'd like to impress the girls,  
make them blush a little  
as she announces falsely "next to Oprah,  
I'm the richest black woman in America."

Wears a large floral-print dress  
that's been let out & out again.  
& now it stretches over her  
like balloon skin ready at any moment  
to pop & shred.

She thinks of herself as some kind of  
Eleanor Roosevelt  
& her visits here & there will usher change,  
& her friends & Kentucky coal miners alike  
will rest a little easier tonight.

She sits in the back of the limosine  
& watches cable tv.  
Now & then she is reminded  
of one of the million things  
she shouldn't have done or said,  
she'll go "Jesus Christ!"  
for no good reason  
& the chauffeur'll slow down  
& ask through the intercom  
"Are you OK, Ms. Ramsay?"

Over the years Tootie has inexplicably  
recoiled into an armadillo ball  
in the corner of a room.

She's depressed.  
She bit down on something bad.  
Blair calling her out of the blue,  
quel deus ex machina, oh!  
For a couple of years  
she had been seriously thinking  
about phoning Blair  
giving her the sob  
& asking for a hand-out.

Like a Brave Girl

Like a brave girl  
Natalie Green went through detox;  
went on the wagon, fell off the wagon,  
prayed to the Lord & cursed her luck.  
It was tiresome to the people  
around her. But what could they do?  
They too did it now & then,  
but just weren't as good at it.  
They could leave the stuff alone.

She carries a tattered copy  
of Don Birnham's The Bottle  
& holds it to her breast  
when it's not going too well.  
She can smell the words  
rancid as an old flower dump  
near a cemetery.

She takes the train  
she takes a cab  
she takes to drink in a bar in Peekskill  
& buys the entire house a round.

Natalie looks out of the window  
of Len's Cocktail Lounge,  
she wonders if when she writes  
"It looks like I'm covered in quicklime"  
as she often does, is it because  
when she passes tin yards  
mysterious piles of rust  
or small towns w faded signs advertising  
things that once were extraordinary:  
radial white walls, drive-ins &c, --  
she can't touch this in a real way,  
can't try all the spaghetti in Little Italy  
or drink up all the bars in Boston,  
can't have a fling for the asking.  
It's all related.

"Are you still writing?" Blair  
asked her on the telephone.

"Not really", Natalie said.

"But I'll be glad to show up  
at our secret meeting  
at the new Warner factory in Peekskill."

Natalie talks like this now & then.  
She forgets to attend their weddings.  
She is 100 lbs overweight.

Out in Ohio

Out in Ohio

Jo Polnyczek's 3rd marriage in as many years  
is on the rocks  
but she doesn't take it too seriously.  
The concerns of another person  
sometimes fade  
dramatically  
like a scratchy record  
you're embarrassed to say  
you liked  
once.

In fact, she'd admit to liking ABBA anyday,  
as far as numbers 1 & 2 go all she can do is shrug.  
She doesn't say the classic things  
about how boys are best for honeymoons,  
"April when they woo, December when they wed"  
& so on. But it's not far off her experience.

Otherwise, it's Jo  
who likes to smoke Lucky Strikes  
& drop a bundle on the market,  
play the stocks  
like the dogs, & chances  
& loses & affirms she's alive.  
& so it goes, as the anchorwoman says,

Jo is pregnant again.

Baby-o,  
she likes having babies.  
She has around 7 of them  
& it takes her a while  
to remember their names  
& the names of their fathers.  
But there is no doubt of her love.  
She has no second thoughts about the meeting,  
about the reunion.  
Who has the time for anxiety?  
Who has the time for reports  
on cellulite's ginchy progress,  
& why so & so decided to go back to school?

"It sounds pretty nuts",  
Jo said to Blair over the phone.  
"Oh there there there Jo",  
Blair said to Jo  
w that same prep school giggle.

Jo takes her beloved Norton,  
kicks it over,



& roars down the PA turnpike  
like the star of a B-film  
about cycle-stompers & leather whores.  
All the way from Cincinnati,  
throughout the panhandle of WV  
& thinking all the way  
that all this nonsense is for the best.  
She wants a cigarette,  
the dry smack of tobacco on the other side  
of her teeth  
but she's quit, again,  
for the baby's sake.

They Are Old Enough

They are old enough to realize  
you should do your own taxes  
& watch your cholesterol  
instead of your chastity.  
Peekskill had nothing to offer.  
Sits inside you like mouthfuls  
of pumpkin pulp,  
when you'd figure all the orange wetness  
could cure the Pope of his vows,  
could raise Elvis from the dead.  
Peekskill is like health-food, like millet-pie,  
its long-term hope  
its green, its fresh air  
its suburban peace  
are lost on its alumni.

The Kennedys, The Knievals,  
it doesn't really matter who you are:  
you do something, you help out, you die  
& maybe the family will howl like coyotes  
when they lower the bronze casket  
or tilt you into the river.

Blair Warner & her friends  
have sifted through their privileges,  
their fortune not to be starving,  
& still feel less than blessed.  
They have seen Paris & the Australian outback.  
They have all watched Love Connection  
& tried to make the connexion  
to its moods & their lives.

For Redd Foxx hell is a country & western bar,  
for John Milton it's a region of  
    "sorrow, doleful shades where Peace  
    & rest can never dwell, hope never comes."  
Which only sounds like a country & western bar.  
For the Facts of Life Girls hell  
is everything post-adolescence  
posthaste.

The Man Who Does My Hair

"The man who does my hair", Blair says  
eyeing her compact,  
"should get some kind of Pulitzer prize."  
& she tosses her Wella Balsam mop around,  
wheat blonde & strawberry scented.  
Geraniums on the table,  
chilled bottles of white wine:  
everything is ready for her guests,  
her erstwhile pals.

The man who does Blair's hair  
should get some sort of prize.  
When they all enter the place,  
enormous, blustering,  
the 1st thing they say is "Blair --  
                    your hair!"  
All their emotional lives  
are somewhere in the hairstyles,  
but it's impossible to disentangle  
to extract its meaning,  
its meaning is underscored  
like an odd complex clarinet part  
in a loud forgettable score.  
Hairstyles come & go.  
The Venus probe,  
the destruction of the rainforests,  
industrial waste mishaps too,  
are forgotten  
like so much guacamole on a chip,  
like a rat seen around a chinese restaurant.

Blair had the hair, always.  
She'll spend any amount  
to blow-dry it into a statement.  
Tootie changes her hair all the time  
but basically there's not much  
that can be done about it;  
now she has an odd, mushrooming, afro.  
Natalie used to be too fat  
to consider hairstyles anything worth considering.  
She's still fat, still drifting inbetween  
nutty-buddies, twinkies & devil-dogs.  
But she's decided, correctly,  
that wild hair styles  
divert attention from the gum-stump she is.  
Her hair is streaked orange & burgundy.  
& Jo Polnyczek, the one w the bike,  
wears her hair like Elvis in Vegas,  
that's the way it is.  
It says: fuck you, goodnight ladies,

see you in hell --  
Black, dried w the wind  
& ready for adventure.

The Facts of Life Girls are home.

Blair Says

Blair says: "sit down friends,  
& let's start yapping --  
books, money, men, food, whatever."  
& she leans back like some tv-time Mafia chief  
after hearing about some sap's fate  
in a little restaurant.  
Pleased, shadowy & full.  
The factory light is bald  
& there's a hollow sound,  
like the place needs activity,  
needs to be popping Barbie heads  
onto their Jayne Mansfieldish bodies.

They have the sense  
to get right into the wine,  
to talk like sailors  
& when the conversation hits  
a particularly useless turn  
one of the girls goes  
    "why all the cloak & dagger,  
Warner,  
    why are we here anyway?"

Couldn't this wait till the next reunion party?

Yeah,

it's real hot in here."

Blair Says

Blair says

"Warner Industries has bought Mattel Inc.  
for no other reason than  
I felt like buying it.  
Like Imelda Marcos buys shoes,  
like the Prime Minister of Canada buys  
Armani suits."

The summer wind picks up the humid air  
& lazily kicks it about,  
a bit of a breeze comes  
through the windows,  
periodically, like tooth pain.

How could anybody work here?

"& as President of Warner toys,  
as supreme pontiff of taste,  
I have decided a new direction,  
a show to the consuming world  
of my magnum magnanimity --  
I have decided to discontinue Barbie,  
decided to send Ken & Barbie  
to the old folks home  
where they'll fall apart  
& wonder if they had a home at all.  
I'll send all our surplus Barbies  
to the Soviet Union,  
see how this unbridled Californian fares  
in the winters that chopped Napoleon to size.  
Tonight I want to standardize  
our play-action-doll stock  
I want our likenesses  
to replace Malibu Barbie & her crew,  
to erect a plastic Mount Rushmore  
if you will  
& design our own dolls.  
The Natalie doll,  
the Jo Polnyczek doll,  
greasy as it is,  
the Tootie doll &  
how could any kid resist?  
The Blair doll, Blair dolls, BLAIR."

They look at each other.  
They know she's serious,  
she has ready-to-print stacks  
& they'll all draw  
like little techies  
participation, oh.

"Sorry... Where was I?"

Go Figure, Kens

Go figure, Kens.

Love, tripped at their heels,  
is ready to be reshaped  
in the shape of a plastic bombshell's  
turn of ankle.

The dolls will be remarkably free  
of taxes, cramps, 0 for 4 nights,  
hamburgers that are raw in the middle,  
traffic jams, deaths in the family,  
& all the things that come inevitably  
when you decide to get up in the morning.

"Barbie, I love you."

"The Barbie camper reeked of Givenchy  
that I had borrowed  
& broke under its wheels."

They spout their ideas,  
they never stop  
& never stop.  
The poor girl is undefined  
nipple-less, orifice-less, it's been said  
a hundred times  
a smoothing over of  
that crucial area  
which has always been noticed.  
It's the same for Ken,  
the wild thing  
impossible.

The four of them can hardly have been shocked,  
not after their accumulated experience.  
Feeling heady, porcine & precious  
they can't think the roundness  
of middle class tales, ambitions:  
pick-ups, addictions.  
Who can?  
We're all middle-class by now.  
But wherefore Barbie?  
What did you do to be exiled to the U.S.S.R.?  
What'll happen to the sequined clothes  
that would make Liberace blush?  
The cache of tennis rackets & electric guitars?

Skinnie Minnie once known as a crazy chick  
has all of a sudden complained of migraine  
& has fallen sick.  
The new girls won't be the old ones at all,  
I mean, mostly  
they just think this is weird  
& man is it hot  
& get on w the job.

They Swear

They swear they can hear the rats  
at the sides of the building,  
hear the flick of their fleas jumping  
& the purr of the pigeons roosting  
in their mud cotes underneath the concrete bridge  
down the road,  
& the bald light of the abandoned factory  
above all delights them:

    thank God it's not them  
slaving around these machines  
helping keep Blair in ermine.  
But somebody has a score to settle,  
wants to revenge w fire.

They make notes & draw w the fervor  
of "Dear Diary, today I became a woman" ..  
type notes.

The Natalie Green doll will  
have the capacity to develop acne  
& should be able to eat canned hams  
like there was no tomorrow

which of course there isn't.

"This is crazy." The Jo Polnyczek doll  
should be able to fight fires  
but so far it looks like all it can do  
is bitch about the bordelaise sauce at Maxim's.  
It ain't easy to get it right,  
it looks a fright  
& "I can't draw worth a damn."

Tootie's creation of herself  
looks a bit angrier,  
a bit more likely to say "gimme the ball."  
Nonetheless she has a better toe-hold  
on the cosmetic concerns  
she never seemed to master before.  
So what.

She's not going around saying  
"your penis, my broomhandle" --  
but what the hell.  
Who's not good for a few laughs  
once they've had a few beers?  
"Maybe a bottle of vodka could be  
one of those accessories not included."

So, Blair confident that "this girl  
should be everything I'm not,  
shouldn't bite her nails nervously,



shouldn't sleep-in so much,  
should graduate,  
should never say never."

She backs up too & draws in her pad  
disfigured sketches, looking  
like Marilyn in a nuclear accident  
rather than the milk-boned Californian  
the one at one w Jesus  
brown w the Pacific coast sun  
& teeth big as accordian keys.

But that's the way it is,  
& they all pass around  
a grungy yellow cloth  
to wipe their brows.

Meanwhile Further Upstate

Meanwhile, further upstate,  
Alison Bly works another truck & tractor pull,  
she wears a french-cut bikini  
w a fluorescent old-glory design.  
She gets into a large plywood box  
in the centre of the muddy tractor field,  
takes a big concert-hall bow  
& closes the lid above her.  
The p.a. man's voice, steely as the d.a.  
says "there's 3 charges of dynamite  
in there. Stand clear  
while Alison detonates  
& emerges unharmed." & true enough,  
Alison emerges unharmed:  
the box blows to smithereens  
leaving a trail of ash & fire  
in all directions from Ms. Bly,  
who for a second lies unconscious  
pale as moonlight, half naked,  
face first in the burned earth  
while bull-necked, tractor-capped men  
w red meaty wrists applaud  
in heavy round claps.  
But Alison gets up, takes an unsteady bow  
& goes somewhere in the wings  
to shake out the concussion.  
She waves to the crowd  
like a proud, homesick astronaut,  
& the crowd showers green praise.

"That girl is crazy"  
says a man who vows revenge  
on the Warners,  
a man known to prowl around  
the outskirts of Peekskill  
& dream of a wild fire that stings the sky --  
revenge on David Warner, textile Czar,  
revenge on a man who ended his career.  
"Yessir that girl is crazy" he says,  
excusing himself from the fair  
& goes out into the night towards Peekskill.

The world is only as crazy as Alison Bly.  
The Facts of Life Girls  
each have something to sell.

Tootie:

I kept thinking that I'll get it out,  
that all that rumbling down there  
will come to its natural conclusion:  
& that I'll puke it out,  
that it will come hurtling out of my face  
& land where it will  
& there it'll be. Out, amazingly out  
& in a heap that pours greasy smoke,  
is full of jutting barbed wire,  
gangrenous undigested sweetbreads  
& hunks of once precious porcelain.  
& it'll hiss & spit like a dragon  
& I can just walk away from it.  
I keep thinking that this will happen.  
But it doesn't, it doesn't, it doesn't.  
My graven Barbie doll will be just like me  
insofar as we'll never sit down & cry.  
I know I have a heart of some kind,  
I can feel it in there, thumping & flapping  
like so many fish poured on the dock.  
So I give it a kappa kappa try,  
think of all the dumb things I've done,  
think of friends dying,  
& why my brother never speaks to me.  
But it never comes.  
I keep deluding myself that I will get it out,  
that once freed of that dry gnawing bulk  
that keeps me dizzy I'll be able to see  
clear as the sonyvision out in centerfield  
& I'll sweep away the owls  
that hoot at my door.  
& I will be free,  
w one sublime Heimlich manoeuvre  
that would out-Heimlich Heimlich  
& outflank the gestures  
of my priest, my psychiatrist,  
my friends, teachers & parents.  
The Tootie doll, above all,  
will be remarkably free  
of the fluttering rot at the base of the lungs  
that keeps me dead silent during long car rides.

Natalie:

After a while you stop caring about being fat,  
"big boned," "pleasantly plump," "chunky" --  
"really nice eyes" will do  
& you move on. You don't have to milk it  
like Gleason come round again  
or like you're auditioning  
for the vacated centre square.  
Sometimes I don't feel so good,  
like when I hear some Paulina or Elle moan  
that they don't look like that in the morning  
or when people buy me diet aids  
as holiday presents.  
(A complete nutri-system plan  
underneath our simple Hanukkah-bush)  
& sometimes you don't feel so good  
because I really like to eat a lot.  
So, there's some LeBrock on one hand  
& the new & improved McDLT on the other,  
for me the choice is obvious.  
Why chase your tail?  
Put on your snazziest tent  
& come dancing till dawn w me,  
I'll tell you about my lover Snake  
& all the chubby chasers  
out of Leland University.  
My grandmother escaped the Nazis.  
Am I to worry about  
every scoop of ice-cream  
& go run around the block  
& run around the block again?  
My Natalie doll doesn't have to be thin,  
doesn't have to be anorexic, vegetarian,  
aerobicized & swimsuit issue ready.  
She can be as round as the Buddha,  
& she can wear terri-cloth-halter-tops:  
just let all the money go to famine relief.  
Meanwhile I just feel like going somewhere  
to polish off a plate  
of Smurf-a-ghetti.

Jo:

It's a good thing I've lost my will to live  
otherwise I'd get real pissed-off  
at the things my friends do.  
It's funny how quickly the Bronx accent fades,  
& I'm in Richard Moll's jacuzzi  
& screaming at LA Laker games.  
Happy, I'll never be that blonde  
& start to moan  
about some o'ergrown wart-like thing  
& oh my it's there & where is the tube,  
the compound-w for my busted purty redheart.  
Why, I could buy a little part of Little Italy  
& dent anybody's car I wanted to.  
All of those ghost tales those pals tell,  
hanging around the shopping centre still,  
saying how everything I did  
was to revenge my welfare case mom  
& in absentia pop --  
ex-con Charlie Polnyczek,  
armed robber, asshole.  
Mrs G, I tell you, girls,  
that woman was like a mother to me.  
I really think she was crazy.  
Why else would she be so kind?  
In the end everybody at that shopping centre  
will doubt whatever I do  
& relate it to whatever donkey-work  
they have to do,  
have to do for their earnest,  
measly reward.  
Feel sorry for them, not for me.  
They hated all my husbands,  
so I don't question their judgement,  
but it's all a drag, so goodbye.  
My little Josephina doll  
will drive a Kawasaki  
& know all the lyrics to "Honky Tonkin."  
She'll be some kind of princess,  
ruddy, wide-legged,  
a big rig heroine that smokes away trouble  
& puts it into 5th gear & roars  
down the slick middle lane.

Blair:

Kids aren't so dumb. The first thing they'll do  
is take off the facts-of-life-dolls clothes  
& question their anatomical worth,  
its correspondence to the truth they know.  
Barbie is just Venus of Willendorf,  
meets Shelley Fabares  
& wants a date to go for pizza.  
No life-like beard, but a pull-string  
to say "right on," "groovy" or "let's go to the beach."  
This whole adventure of ours  
is a death-ray blast  
where circular-saw scars will never  
circumvent my People magazine aspirations.  
The Aurora F. realis sometimes  
makes the most in my windows  
wriggle w a kind of green  
you might've found in my grade 11 wardrobe.  
Each night, despite this,  
I find a safe spot to munch, drink  
& watch whatever I want to watch on tv.  
Don't take it too seriously,  
there have been larger fires  
than immortalizing ourselves in lithe  
play-action figures perpetually 19.  
Not many, but there have been.  
There is a whole life to live  
regardless of the perfection  
our Peekskill factory will ceaselessly produce  
& accessorize w leather, suede, & naugahide.  
There isn't much to say all of a sudden:  
I'm rich & think wine tastes bad,  
never as blood-of-Christ as it looks.  
I've looked over the sketches,  
wiped my brow for the thousandth time  
& realize once again it just won't do.  
La la la rock & roll black shoe.  
I'll send you what you want,  
'the Warner Scholarship for Losers' if you want.  
Money. Free money.  
Don't ask me what I'm trying to prove,  
where any of this silk-shirt selfishness goes;  
if there was a god  
why would he allow such suffering to go on?  
Burn it down for all I care  
let it blaze out like fireweed  
& fill this part of Peekskill,  
this quiet industrial suburb,

w a purple smoke that talks  
of all the sad girls in gowns  
squinting for prom photographs.  
This meeting is over.  
Let's get out of here.

Worms in Beaks

Worms in beaks, in gullets,  
crawling in lean & thin & all that,  
makes us food all the more.  
Ken & Barbie can't be neutered,  
so worry instead about  
their unwanted pregnancies,  
their free-basing debts,  
their ill-fitting slacks,  
their incurable but treatable diseases.

"This place in Peekskill  
I thought would help in some way,  
& in some way it has,  
but not this way" Jo says  
as the others crumple their notes  
& leave town & each other  
& have another round.

& the place  
burns down while everybody sleeps.  
They'll make another factory  
somewhere in Kentucky  
where unions aren't so powerful.  
& the culprit will never be caught.

Imelda Marcos is recording pop songs,  
John Denver wants to go to the moon.  
George Hamilton flogs skin-care products  
although his face is pre-cancerous, splotchy,  
& Elvis is still dead.

The Warner Industries factory  
will be smoldering for days,  
while the girls settle into  
their old lives  
& figure out  
what they got out of the hot summer night.

Look out your windows, girls,  
survive,  
stay clear of the police.  
There's cardinals in the trees,  
splashing red flutters  
in spots you'd least expect.  
The fire rests, nothing there,  
like any old tale  
about Grandpa's meaty palms  
& the men they'll eat like air.  
Cardinals rushing about Peekskill.  
Can you believe  
all those darts of red?