

MY LIFE IS GOOD

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Abstract

MY LIFE IS GOOD

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The 34 original poems in this collection are concerned with how to live in the world. These poems oscillate between innocence and cynicism, sincerity and irony, believing and unbelieving, sometimes all within the same poem. These things coexist to form poems that offer no comfort, grace, or promise of immortality. *My Life is Good* staggers somewhere between the title's blunt assertion and its nagging need to be asserted.

Acknowledgements

This thesis is dedicated to my grandmother, Constance.

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I, Ishmael, was one of that crew; my shouts had gone up with the rest; my oath had been welded with theirs; and stronger I shouted, and more did I hammer and clinch my oath, because of the dread in my soul.

–Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*

*I could not be a boy,
For in the billowing air I was fleet and green
Riding blackly through the ethereal night
Towards men's words which I gracefully understood,
And it was given to me
As the soul is given the hands
To hold the ribbons of life!
As miles streak by beneath the moon's sharp hooves
And I have mastered the speed and strength
Which is the armor of the world.*

–Frank O'Hara, *Poem*

WHEN I WAS A BOY

Manicured and permed
Like old debutantes,
My two youngest aunts
Smoked Matinée
As they stared at the same
Catalogue all day,
Turning every page, every page, every page.
They lived with my grandmother
Who kept an eye on us three,
The sons of her daughters,
My two cousins and me.

We were the boys
Playing out back,
Enacting a scene
From a movie we'd seen.
The point of the scene
Was to free the blonde,
Snivelling, pleading,
Chained to a tree.

Oh boy was I fond
Of playing the blonde!
When I played her,
I caused quite a stir.
My aunts did me up
In their cheap makeup.
They thought it was fun
Smearing their thumbs
Under my eyes
So it looked like I cried.
That way I was free
To make myself be
Helpless and blonde, so womanly.

The bad guy would chain me
Tight to the maple tree,
And the good guy would rush
From the house or the bush
With a makeshift machete
Or M87
To save me from going to heaven.
It was a race against the bomb,

Our grandmother's alarm clock
Ticking on the lawn.
For extra effect,
My cousin would place
A gun to my face
And shout something loud
In the bad guy's tongue.
For extra effect,
I placed the gun in my mouth
To muffle my shouts
While the good guy crept
Along the shade of the house.
Over and over, and all day long,
I was the blonde
Who did everything wrong.
I kicked and squirmed,
I pleaded and bawled,
I lived, I died
Until lunch was called.

From seven to three,
I was hard at work
Not being me.
Then mom came back
From the packing plant,
Smelling like blood,
Smelling like the inside of a can.
I remember her smell
As she sat and complained
Of work on the chain,
A stale, meaty air
That came off her hair
When she plopped to the chair.
Her day's work was done.
It was anything but fun.
It was a loaded gun
Cocked in her mouth
That paid for the house,
When the day was done.

And when the day was done,
She took me home
In her big green Renault,
All wind and radio,
With my makeup still on.
I was her son.

Boy I loved my mom.
She scrubbed my face off
With a hot washcloth
And then we'd watch
The blondes on TV
Until my work was done
And it was bedtime for me.

THE MOUSE

I saw the little brown blotch
Darting like an afterthought
Along the living room wall
Before it dashed for the hall
And the darkness beyond.

I trapped it there, under Tupperware,
Cautiously aware of the poor little thing
Trembling with fear
At my enormous leer.
Its quick nervous ears took me in
Through the thin plastic skin,
Its little limbs ready to spring
Towards whatever wasn't me.

Outside, the city
Was overcome with snow.
Frost pushed in against the windows.
I had no idea what to do with the fellow.
Should I drown him in a bucket?
Should I chuck him in the trash?
I didn't have the guts for all that.
I couldn't bear to think of him
In a trash bag by the street,
Clawing at the Tupperware he was in,
Sucking all the air
Slowly out of there,
Trying and trying,
And dying from his trying.

I have never killed what couldn't be squashed
With the blind dab of a tissue
Or the swoop of a swat.
Listening to my heart,
I brought him to the park,
The little mouse in the Tupperware,
As light as air.
I popped the lid
And watched it scam
From the plastic skin
In the palm of my hand.

What's the difference between being saved and being spared,

I thought, strutting my way down the block.
I felt like God
Coming down to stop
Abraham from lopping
His son's head off.
Or perhaps I was Abraham
In the palm of God's hand,
And this was a test
I could never understand.
Just then I saw
A cat in the night,
A pitch black shadow
Slunk against the white.
It leered at me, right through my soul,
Razor glints that know
A breathing brown blotch
From a spot on the snow.
I thought of killing the cat
With a hammer or a bat
To save the mouse
I had saved from all that.
But it looked at me
Then dashed for the park,
All of its senses
Aimed at the dark.

Poor mouse, I thought,
As I entered the house.
I could have kept him
In a cage, as a pet
And fed him cheese
And met his needs.
But instead I ate Cheetos
And watched TV.
It was too late.
I had sealed its fate,
Like Tupperware seals
The freshness in,
Like a cat always wins
Before the hunt begins.
The world is mean, I said,
As I climbed into bed,
Snug in my den,
Spared of all cares.

That night, I dreamt

An angel circled above me
In the streets of the city
Watching, watching.
The angel descended
And reached out to me –
Light bursting from light,
Grace from grace,
Pure, powerful, pitiless.
Its talon grip
Cracked my oesophagus,
As it pulled back my chin
To suck out the wind,
The knowledge, the marrow, the words within.
I sighed a last bubbling gasp
As it dropped me to the street,
A sac of skin and meat,
A winded bagpipe.
Soon enough, bite after bite,
The rats tore me apart,
Gnashing at my cartilage,
Chewing me to pulp,
A stain on the sidewalk.
The windows of the street
Had human eyes
Watching, watching.
No one helped me.
No one asked for my name.
No one knew me, or cared.
And I woke weeping with joy!
I was saved.
I was in a city
Covered with snow,
In my bed, in my room,
In my house all alone.

GARE CENTRALE

The noise here rises like a hymn or dust
Up, up to the vaulted ceiling.
It rises and is suffused
With the light dragged through the high windows,
This heavenly haze
Hanging over our heads.

People gather under numbers, check their phones
And disperse into the shuffling crowd,
Lugging their belongings with them
Like penitents to an empty church.
A woman sits by an open umbrella,
Blowing on her coffee,
Ankles crossed.
The shoe shiner leans
In the darkness of his doorway,
The corner of his apron
Hanging from his bended knee,
Dipping into the light.
Long ago, he learned
To keep time from the faces of strangers.
Tell me, how many faces make up the days?
Many, my friend, many.

And meanwhile, somewhere,
All the time, all the time,
A train travels along its tracks all the time,
Barrelling through light and wind,
Bound to a far, fixed point.
A train travels along its tracks
And the faces in the windows blur
To one long yawning face, the mask of time,
Which we must wait behind
To make anything, even our waiting, happen.

THE PICTURE

I have a picture of me among them.
It was a birthday party for me
In someone's back yard,
Balloons and cake and whiskey.
Everybody was gathered
And we were having fun,
In the picture,
In the greenness of someone's backyard.

Yes, I have a picture of this.
It was Frank's backyard.
I was turning twenty-five.
We were having fun,
Grinning at the camera,
Shit-eating grins that said
We have this, whatever it is,
That anoints the moment.
It was a wonderful day.
I have it taped to my wall.

It is taped to my wall
By the computer where I write.
Sometimes I stare at it
And think of that moment,
The need for more moments,
What's happening as I write.
I have a picture of me
In the greenness of Frank's backyard
And I was twenty-five
In that imperishable light,
This picture of me,
This picture of others,
This picture on my wall.

I have a picture of me with them
And I miss it.
Everybody used to be
A series of simple emergencies.
You got to know them
And then you needed them.

Or I'm no longer sure.

I have a picture of this.
It's on the wall where I write.
The picture says
You have needed them.
And I have.
I have needed them.

SPRING

*The trees are coming into leaf
Like something almost being said;
The recent buds relax and spread,
Their greenness is a kind of grief.*

—Philip Larkin

My sleep is long and only part of the shadow
The night casts over the city.
In sleep I wait for nothing, not even spring
To loosen the roots, the ice, the bricks,
The grip of this small eternity
Coddling me.

But alas, the light of the sun intrudes
Like the bright bursting sound of a gong
Struck by a dutiful god
Who makes sure that everyone, everywhere, always
Is washed in the golden drone
Of consciousness another day.

And soon the percolator huffs
The coffee I drink in the presence
Of more, again more, the mornings of spring
Pressing at the windows,
And the birds, in a frenzy to make birds for next spring,
Making homes out of sprig and plastic.

The squirrels are haggard and hungry.
I know that glint of panic in the eyes,
When I lifted the barbeque lid
And found one nested there, in the grease of the grill;
When the light of everything at once
Looms down on you like a verdict.

Dazed, innocent, we go through the spring
Bumping into each other politely.
Winter keeps the inside in, the outside out.
The window shrieks with the light of day.
I watch it get louder, longer,
And yield.

The window is open, letting in the wind
That kicks the curtains to a cancan.
The air is fresh with mud.
It moans something dirty, and I loosen.
I have nothing to say. I smile. Today, today –
The flowers are very pretty today.

POEM FOR MY GRANDMOTHER

When I heard you were sick
You became the little girl
You told me about,
The one who used to hide in the hay
In the red and white barn
When it was time
For her to do the dishes.
And I became the little boy
You told those stories to,
And I hid with you in the hay,
Listening to your father's voice
Calling through the rafters, calling for you
When the summertime warmed the hay
And the dishes were piling up
And you didn't want to be found.

OCTOBER LATELY

In the late afternoon, the kids call
And we talk about small things.
Everybody's been kind. They bring apples
And the apples are delicious.

The sea's been choppy and the nights got cold
But the sun still warms the daytime.
The crab season is done.
It was a bad one, it was.

The garden isn't doing so well.
The tomatoes have ripened and dropped,
The rhubarb went brown.

The white plastic swan
You bought in the city
Is still where you left it.
By the rhubarb, the tomatoes.

THE JELLYFISH

The tide recedes
And leaves behind
The jellyfish on the shore.

Their tentacles,
Wisps of raw nerve,
Wither in the wide open air.

It's November, nobody's around.
The gulls have pecked the crabs apart.

Soon, under the moon and the stars,
The jellyfish will die and the tide will rise,
Calm and relentless, bringing more.

WE USED TO TOSS PENNIES IN THERE

I ran into him there,
By the fountain at the centre of town,
After a year, one day, my cousin.

It was summer
And I was back home
From my first year of university.

He asked for ten bucks
And I gave it to him.
He asked me for a smoke and I gave him that too.

And we sat by the fountain.
We used to toss pennies in there, remember,
While grandma went to the market?

He took a good, long drag.
The pennies, yeah,
They would gleam in there.

BIKE RIDE

Cars are aquariums filled with radio
That rush to a stop as I flow
Like a brook-swept minnow
Past their cold, pent up windows.

They'll be home before me, I know
But I'll have a smile to show,
As I take my going slow
From green to red and red to go!

And as I go I hear the birds
Chirp chirp chirp as engines whirr –
Of all the noises, dear Lord, please rest assured,
Among all this, I have heard the birds.

HOME

It's a simple country road
You're walking down,
A simple country road
Lined with maples
Redder in the sun.

The road is straight and easy
And the people you meet
Are kind with what they know.
They are strangers
But you greet them gently

Because the road is simple and bright
And you are heading home.
Ahead, at the end of the road
There's a house, your home, and beyond that,
Nothing but sea and sky.

In that home,
The people you love
Are gathered in the heat of the kitchen,
In the memories of that kitchen,
The smell of pies and gravy.

Whatever reason you had for leaving,
Whatever job, whatever errand...
All that no longer matters.
It never did.
You are heading home

Empty handed and hungry
Down that bright and quiet road
With only what you know:
Life is simple.
You are walking in a straight line

Towards all the people you love.
They are waiting for you.
You will be there soon.
You will be there soon.
You will be there soon.

THE YAWL

The water along with the night
Warps and wavers in my wake,
A full moon's keep of light
Widening to a silvery lake,
Winding, wayward, gone.

Alone, I man the ragged masts.
They catch the slightest sigh
That puts me on my path,
A long, drifting goodbye,
Winding, wayward, gone.

KILL POEM

I found a mouse
Caught in the trap.
I killed the mouse
With quick little taps.

Its shrieks were squeaks
To my human ears.
Tap tap tap
With my boot heel.

The mouse man came
With all his poisons.
Little pink pellets
Is what was chosen.

Now no mice
Move through the walls.
Now no mice
Bother to call.

Little pink pellets,
Little pink pills.
It's all very human,
I don't have to kill.

No mice in the walls
Means I can work.
Tap tap, a poem.
Tap tap, this verse.

HONEST POEM

The man in the middle of the way
Is a very important poet.
He is passionately engaged with his phone,
Tapping the screen with extreme dexterity,
Sending information through me
Like an angel in a hurry.
I don't mind being a vessel for this man's epistle.
My body is an antenna annexed.
I am pregnant with his text.
It is a pleading, eloquent text
Asking a young poetess for anal sex.

What are we to each other?
Put the details in an email
And beam them through my body.
My body will take what's naughty
And turn it into copy.
My soul, eternal bore, will turn it into poetry.
It will pleasure itself with beauty
And make itself feel tingly.
It will come inside of itself
And make a stillborn baby.
The baby will have the poet man's voice
And I will be a mother to it.
I will feed it words of splendour and wit.

Come quick, I think I felt it kick!
Believe me, I want to believe
I have conceived
A thing of immaculate beauty.
It was put there by the man's desire
To soar a little higher,
To soar to the sun,
To have this young girl's bum.
The baby swishes inside me.
I want it in me.
I want to believe.
I want it to tear right through me
And make me feel all tingly.

BREAKFAST BANANA

His entire life, in the jungles of Nicaragua,
Alberto Rosales has cut down bananas.
They are green when he cuts them down,
A green that ripens to gold
In the supermarkets
Of wintry Massachusetts.

Blonde haired and debonair, the owner is called
The Banana Baron by some.
He works for the Dole Food Corporation.
He moves frugally under the sun
And lights up at the mention
Of expensive skin lotions.
He speeds through the city in a hand-built Maserati.
When a jet flies over Managua,
He knows who owns it.

At dawn, when the workday's begun,
A whistle and the crop-dusters drop
Nemagon on the bananas below.
Huddled in their sweltering huts,
Workers watch it pour
On the fat green leaves
Of the Banana Baron's trees.
The children know if they play in this rain
It will make them insane, totally bananas,
Drooling man-babies in stinking pyjamas.

Alberto and his wife have no child,
But Lord knows they've tried.
Night after night, they moan in their sweltering hut.
They fuck and fuck but have no luck.
They are in a rut.
Alberto Rosales went to see a specialist
Who told him his efforts were pointless.
Anita Rosales has lost all hope.
She has stopped praying to the Pope.
She has resigned herself to the work in the fields.
At least the banana trees yield.

Dawn in my dining room, dawn across America.
Workers and owners eat breakfast bananas.
I need potassium, personally.

The banana dangles in front of me
Like a carrot on a stick.
It is a perfectly massive dick.
Should I eat it in a flash
Or shove it up my ass?
Would it fit?
What in the world should I do with it?
I can't resist, it is pure gold.
I'll put in my mouth hole.
Mmmm. Thank you, Dole.

NEW YEAR'S EVE

I outlive Oscar de la Renta
And the victims of Ebola.
I outlive Joan Rivers.
I outlive the neighbour's dog.
I outlive Abdulllah Al Saud.
I outlive Lauren Bacall.
I outlive them all.

They fill an open grave in heaven.
Up there they rot
And I do not.
I am caught in conversation
With a dazzling man.
His hair is the colour of rust,
His eyes are the colour of dust.
The hostess introduced us.
Renaud is his name, a friend of a friend
With a nice rear end.

We drink and are well fed.
We certainly are not dead.
We are sucking back oysters, one after another.
Down the hatch they go!
Another one, dear Renaud?
I douse one in Pernod.
Down his milky throat
Slides the pearly prize.

Five, four, three, two, one!
A bottle goes off like a gun.
I drain my glass to the stem.
I'm draining light from a gem.
I drink and see my death
Get smaller and smaller.
I drink and drink.
It shrinks and shrinks.
It shrinks to the size of an embryo.
It shrinks to almost zero.
It shrinks and is dissolved
Into my ego.
Tonight I will blow myself away
All over that man named Renaud.

DREAM MAN

In my dreams, dream man is dead.
He is dead and dreams of nothing.
I want him this way. I mean,
In this way, I want him.
His silky lips, a pouty pair, are pursed to receive
Whatever I need.
He is perfect for me.
He is empty inside, but then again
Who isn't these days?

His skin is softer than woman.
He is draped across the bed,
A jumpsuit of skin
Perfectly shed.
Yum yum, what a treat
Dream man draped across the sheets!
I slip inside of him
Through a slit along the back.
I slide my legs in first,
Then the arms, then the face.
That last part I fear.
I don't want him to tear
From eye to ear!
When I am dressed, I ask him
To zip me up the back,
Which, of course, is his back,
And I have a good laugh.
He is a perfect fit
But tight around the crotch a bit.

I look in the mirror
At his perfect empty face,
His perfect empty throat,
His perfect empty eyes,
And fall in love
With what I need.
He is everything a man should be
And more.
He is perfect at the core.

Sometimes I think I hear him moan
And dream, Is dream man dreaming of me?
But of course he is not.

It is only my voice fluttering back at me.
Besides, what would dream man have to say?
If his mouth were more than a hole in his face,
If his lips were more than fleshy lace,
I would rip him to rags and give him to the maid.

When I am done, I gently shed him
And bring him to Mr. Yim.
He is the dry cleaner on my block.
He does not question what I brought.
He once collaborated with Pol Pot.

I wake in a paltry state.
I shit and shower, I shave my face.
My face fits nothing like his.
I don't know why that is.
Dreaming of him fills me with dreams
Like I fill him with me,
Like a pastry filled with cream,
Like a cheerleader filled by a football team,
Like you, dear reader, filling me with what I mean.
I'm full of it.
Don't think you aren't complicit.
My skin is papery thin, but it won't tear.
There is room for you in here.

VISITING THE BRITISH MUSEUM

I feel like an empress totally at home
Among bits of Greece and Egypt and Rome!
An Easter Island head, the Rosetta Stone!
African flutes carved from bone!
Even Nefertiti's mummy on loan!
All this will last long after I'm gone.

Say what you will of modernity,
I am rushing through the riches of history
And taking a million selfies.
Can you imagine how it was back then, the misery?
The disease, the squalor, the barbarity.
There are worst things to happen than money.

Sometimes I can't resist the impression
History has some sort of lesson.
It's like being on the peak of a dizzying mountain!
I close my eyes and have horrible visions.
I see teeth tearing at venison.
I see looting in the streets of London.

I don't know.
It's too much to take in while sipping a cappuccino.
I think I'll go and look at some Van Gogh.
I love the way his colours glow.
He cut off his ear, did you know?
He cut off his ear and died horribly alone.

HISTORY

The leaves on the streets
Are mashed to a wet brown cud.
The sun is rapidly dwindling.
Let's face it, our lives are not that interesting.
This is the extent of my troubles.
Believe me, I am grateful.

In Baltimore, it's the same old story.
On the bus, fists clenched whitely to her purse,
I hear a good woman say
Well, there's no reason to be afraid
If they'd simply obey.
The other good woman beside her agrees.
Perfume seethes from them absurdly
Like the nightmare of history.

What will burn will burn and then
It will all be over again.
In Baltimore, you hang your head or run.
Past the city, in the pastoral lands,
More prisons are appearing
To address the situation.
The situation is brutal and bitter
Like the coming of winter.

In a pasture covered in snow
A fat bull deliberates
Nothing all day.
His mind, perfectly bovine,
Is blank like the fields of late.
The bull grunts and then upchucks
A ball of steaming cud.
He chews and chews and chews it up.
He chews the wad of brown
Then swallows it back down
With a loud, smacking sound.

THIS POEM IS NOT SHORT

I don't trust short men.
They want what I got.
I want what they got
But not like that.

In the metro, they huddle
Like weasels under my arm.
I fear they might nibble
My nipples for some Tall.

Then again, they can't reach.
I'd love to see them try
To climb this high.
For that, I'd give them a teat.

I'd also give them an "A"
For simply hanging in there.
It's not easy being short.
Everyone sees your toupee.

I am tall.
I have it all.
I breathe down the necks
Of the little pricks.

Hitler, Stalin, Napoleon,
These are all short men.
Would you trust any of them
At the nation's helm?

That is, once again,
If they could reach.
You can't make a speech
From a booster seat.

I want to tickle
All short men.
I want them to wriggle
To the shape of a pickle.

My accountant is short.
My doctor is too.
Tom Cruise is short.
He wears elevator shoes.

I wear big people shoes
And stoop to enter a room.
When I cook in the nude,
Cock dangles over the food.

This is not a problem short men fear.
Even with step ladders
Their dinks can't clear
The top of the counter.

This is why short men schmooze.
One has to drink a lot of booze
To be fucked by a man
In elevator shoes.

I drink a lot of booze.
I would fuck Tom Cruise.
In his elevator shoes, on tiptoes,
He might just reach my A-hole.

He'd squeal a squirrel's
Shrill mating call.
Having him in me would be
Like flinging a cocktail weenie down a hall.

Seconds later, once he was done,
I'd lie and tell him I had some fun.
Why not? After all,
If you give them an inch they'll still be small.

The world is full of little short men
Who need our little white lies.
The world is full of little white lies
Because of their little white size.

Size doesn't matter.
That's the biggest lie of all.
Just look at this poem,
It's seventeen stanzas tall.

JE DEVINS UN OPÉRA FABULEUX

Vanished, vanished, the poems of yore.
Stick with me, I'll give you
Shenanigans and gore.

For instance, a terrorist
Learns to love Christmas before
Blowing us up into bits.

I share your despair.
I pick up every whiff of it
That races through the air.

Hope in the world exists
Like a diamond swallowed by a bear
On the endangered species list.

About the world, I'm trying
To give a shit.
I'm sick of polar bears whining.

All night, I let the candles burn.
Erect like flowers, the little things
Yearn and yearn and yearn and yearn...

I lounge in the sheets and listen
To the mice in the walls as they spurn
The poison that makes them stiffen.

They pass into the page's blinding white light,
Kept like specimens in a jar of formalin.
Poems are the ghosts of mice.

I won't describe to you how
I'm a diva, a device.
Things should be clearer by now.

I'm a queen passing for a king,
A wolf disguised as a sacred cow.
Excuse me, gentlemen, if my slip is showing.

I have slipped down a crevasse of jade.
To survive, I chew on my casing.
Every word I say, I waste away.

I am gorging on my flout.
I am choking on my fey.
Every word I say, I could live without.

MISANTHROPE

Who me?
Just kidding.
I know what I am.
I'm a rusty old can
Of expired ham
Stowed in the corner
Of a crusty old bunker.

Luckily for me,
You don't have to like people to write poetry.
People just get in the way.
All you need to write poetry
Is a shotgun aimed at your brain,
The mind's eye staring down the barrel,
Staring down the darkness, the trigger, the boom –
And boom, a poem
Flows from the wound.

Boom boom.
I love you.

Once, I believed in people,
In the music they made,
The games they played,
Their kings who ate
Papaya in private jets.
The whole thing is a mess.
People have blood on their hands.
Mine have ink.
I aim at my think.

In a pasture lush with lilac bush,
A harpsichord perfumes the air.
Not a cloud covers the day.
A hen sashays through hay.
Not a soul is around
But an empty phrase.
In a pastime lush with empty husks,
The report of a pistol
Breaks the shush.
Boom. From a hole in the skull,
A poem froths forth.

I hope you are wearing galoshes.
It gets messy out here in the pastures.
It's about digging a grave
As deep as you can,
Digging and digging
Until you reach nothing
And then choose to dig some more,
Digging and digging
As deep as you can
Until dirt, a sewer main bursts
And shit shoots out all over your shirt,
But you choose to keep digging,
Digging, digging,
Past the corpses,
Past the common grave,
Dig, dig, dig,
Until you think
You've reached nothing
And dirt,
A bunker –
You pry it open,
Letting in the light,
Exposing all the shapes,
The shapes from the darkness,
The darkness of the shapes,
And suddenly a glint of tin
Catches your eye
And you are holding a rusty old can
Of expired ham
In the darkness of the corner,
Holding it spoiling
In its airless tin,
Where nothing can survive
And nothing is preserved
But the stench of rot,
A pink turned to grey,
The weight of a brain,
A greyness that will last
Forever and ever, amen.

GHOST STORY

Past the town and through the hills,
The still white hills of birch and snow,
There, in a house, by the lake frozen over,
A ghost sits by a fire, ripping the pages
From the books on the shelf, page by page,
Putting them to the hellish embers.

Slumped by the fire, he stares as they turn
To outbursts of flame, insights that live
And flare into ash, curl into smoke, plume up the pipe
And float, drifting, downhill to the town
Where a man remembers the smell of wood
Burning as he read by a fire as a boy.

Brave little boy, belly to the rug
By the fiery hiss and collapse of the logs,
Long winds forcing their way down the flue,
Gagging the fire, rustling the flames, stomping the ash,
In a cold winter night he feared like death:
He remembers being young and very afraid.

And he remembers when he finished the book,
The moment he tore his eyes from the page,
Everything sharper, too sharp, too real,
Being alone with the weight of the book.
He was no longer afraid, but all alone, so alone
Like a child after anything ends...

THE LIGHT

Every night, the spotlight fixed
Firmly on her flaws, the actress performs
Before a sold-out crowd
Of family and friends
All waiting for her to fuck up.

Every morning,
The champions eat their breakfast
And the sexy ones go home,
Confetti in their haircuts,
With other sexy ones.

I suck the soup
Straight out of the can.
The mailbox is full
Of small, pressing debts.
When I go to parties, people have
Very important and modern problems.

Good riddance to conclusions,
But mostly how they come about.
Let me tell you about starting over:
Like the window you look from
To see the morning come,
Everybody sees through you
Letting in the light.

THE MOVIES

Because sex and death are everywhere
In the back of our minds
And we like to watch
In the dark crowded silence
Our thoughts, which are flesh
Turn into light.

We watch the buxom blonde
Quiver, almost, almost like the breeze
While his hand pins her down
To the plush satin sheets
And the other hand rips
The silk from her breasts.

*Will she get killed or will she get fucked?
He will throttle her dead.
My God her breasts are pure.
We want to throttle her dead.
We want those tits.
She will know we exist.*

But the buxom blonde survives:
The actress has signed for the sequel.
The credits roll, the darkness lifts
And slowly we emerge, dazed
Into the light of what we know,
Turning to each other and turning to each other

To find out what is right.
Yes, yes, these are our lives
Full of immortal buxom blondes
We would never touch or fuck or kill.
And when that gets too real
We go to the movies.

MONEY

Money, the balm, caught in the apothecary's till
In fresh cut wads of greenery
Is lies, goddamn it, and cannot be contained
Like jazz in the junkyard adjacent to yonder.

Get up and google it:
The goons have gotten hold of the Guggenheim.
And *I never*, and we never, but they did, so go on,
Enjoy a spritzer on the terrace of Taste.

Disgusted anarchists drizzle oil down the drain
And discuss the wilted age of fellowships and war
In bleak, bleak terms, the language of the wise,
O those who do not care for the colour khaki they wear.

The politician is chumming discourse into the crowd:
"Cooperation is for supermodels and silverback gorillas!"
While the Shah that broke the last camel's back
Is dining on a chump in a Ritz of crumbling Rome.

Fireworks, artificial fire, the friendliest of the bombs
Shimmy across the water, shimmy, shimmy
To Amazing Grace being played on the tuba
By a man or a woman with no face or age or race.

And the cracked out teller is madly cackling,
Taking stock with a golden pen,
After the tabs have been counted and scabs left alone
To dangle, never fester, never heal.

WINTER

The day is very beautiful.
Bright and white, it has nothing to say.
Then the night pushes the day away
And the night is very beautiful.
It is very beautiful.
The moon is very beautiful.
Cold and bright, it has nothing to say.
Then the day pushes the night away
And the day is very beautiful.
It is very beautiful.
The snow is very beautiful.
Calm and cold, it has nothing to say.
Then the night pushes the day away
And the night is very beautiful.
It is very beautiful.
The wind is very beautiful.
Big and calm, it has nothing to say.
Then the day takes the night away
And the day is very beautiful.
It is very beautiful.
The sky is very beautiful.
Blue and big, it has nothing to say.
Then the night takes the day away
And the night is very beautiful.
It is very beautiful.
The stars are very beautiful.
Bright and blue, they have nothing to say.
Then the day takes the night away
And the day is very beautiful.
It is very beautiful.
The day is very beautiful.
White and bright, it has nothing to say.
Then the night takes the day away
And the night is very beautiful.
It is very beautiful.
The night is very beautiful.

MEXICO

I am lying on a beach of Mexico
Under a palm tree rustling in the wind.
The palm tree is waving goodbye
To the dark and straying sky.
It says goodbye heaven, goodbye God.
There is no one here to answer to
But the stars pinning up the night's high tarp
Hung carefully over me
As I go from thought to thought
To this place:
A kingdom of salt
At the edge of a swollen sea
Burning with salt.

Salt in my hair, salt in my youth, salt in my voice.
My love was pure and would not cleanse.
I was alone among nothing but the sea and moon,
The sea and moon going further to a point
I could not see, so I went
Pushing against the beating waves,
Further, further against the waves, the days,
I went further and looked back at the beach,
At the hotel on the slope, the brilliant little squares,
One of them ours,
And I stopped, exhausted by faith
And let the waves, in small, indifferent gestures
Dismiss me back to shore.

I am a man in love, another one.
What more?
You answer everything, I answer nothing
And we grasp at each other's clothes
In front of a fire
We've built of all these years.
The very real hardships of winter
Become an excuse to stay together
And we do. And along with longing
Winter is a season that clings.
Sometimes still, I stare at the lake behind your mother's house
And think of the sea.

I am lying on a beach of Mexico.
From the hotel on the top of the slope

In the brilliant plaza, on the brilliant stage
The show must go on.
The guitar is brisk and brittle,
The bongos do
And do.
I have pledged myself
To whatever, by remaining, remains.
That means you and the sea and the moon.
And beyond the sea, just over there
Where storm clouds crash into the horizon,
Lightning is showing me the entire night, the sea, the shore
For a split second briefer.

HYMN

And as far as I can tell
The soul exists!
It is you reflected through
Your thought window.

It is not there before you, waiting,
Like a sage in the white white daisies.
No. It grows along with you.
It is you in the memories you have.

It is every song sung
Brimmingly.
Inside the song, it is the singing.
It lives in the listening.

What the ears and the eyes
And the tongue and the nose
And the fingertips discern,
The soul beholds.

It is the imagination
Charged with keen rejoice.
It doesn't believe in God.
It makes Him up as it goes.

It is everything you believe in
Held up to the world
Like a pane of glass
So clean no one can see.

See through that glass,
See the world like that,
And whatever you do, my friends,
Don't let it get smashed.

WHEN RODRIGO COMES HOME

Here we are again, Rodrigo and I,
Shirtless in the kitchen among the pies and stews,
Two drunk and portly kings, dancing, dancing,
For the radio plays the polka all night long.

O Rodrigo, you share nothing with the man
Who's home every day at five, so light up the candles
And ladle the stews! Everything's gravy
For the trucker arrived, Rodrigo always says, pies in his eyes.

O Rodrigo, driving through the mountains and the towns,
The cornfields and the dusk, the miles and miles of America alone,
Out there with your heavy load, stopping only to eat
The meatloafs of Michigan, the hotdogs of Ohio.

The road is your toil, babe, and tonight it ends with me
And our bellies in the kitchen in the moonlight touching.
Dance, Rodrigo, dance tonight, and tomorrow, together,
We'll sleep off the asphalt, the diesel, the windshield, the wheel.

THE WIDOW MACDONALD

He wasn't a bad man, but he was a man:
When he wasn't pulling crab from the sea,
It was whiskey from a bottle
Or dresses from pale strong knees
(Or so went his bachelorhood lore).
The Crabber MacDonald, stud of the sea –
And she knew it when she took his name.
Newlyweds, their lovemaking rattled the tea cups.
This was 1965, she was 17: this island was it.
There was nothing, nothing beyond the sea
But gulls and whales and ships and fools.

As a child, once a year, at the end of the season,
She watched the men arrive to their wives
Waiting on the wharf in rare bright dresses
That flapped like the flags of warmer places.
Their legs were so white in the cold of October...
She remembers the smell of bait and ash
In the wool of the gruff laughing men, as their catch,
A jagged ball of squirming crabs,
Swung in the dripping high net behind them.
She remembers her father's scarred grey hands
Pinching her mother's store-bought dress.

The days when her husband was gone
Stretched on and on, leaving her to her books, the house,
And whatever was left of the garden.
She imagined the sea, in its loneliness long ago,
Dreaming of land and land appearing,
And the land, in its loneliness,
Dreaming of people and people appearing,
And people, in their loneliness,
Dreaming of other people and other people appearing,
And that's why there are always more people and more,
Because the sea was a lonely place.

With time, she peopled her island like this.
Home, the sea and the wind closing in –
With time, islands get smaller. She was a crabber's wife.
There were four children now, and another on the way.
Her husband provided, and she loved him for that,
If sometimes only for that; his silent, ancestral service.
She was the shore shaped by his devotion.

Late at night, when she fed the baby,
She looked at the dark moving mass of the sea
And imagined its peaceful moonlike floor,
And a crab, alien thing, crawling past a crowded trap.

And she loved him like this until death.
The kids have scattered to the city.
They call and remember him fondly,
Gathering memories, mounds of sand,
Making their own little islands out of the man.
Yes, yes, the Widow Macdonald says, yes.
But whatever is left of the Crabber MacDonald
Is long since Atlantic, scattered like spume
On the always washing, collapsing waves.
Nothing is lost: things sink or float forever.

She's 67 now. She wonders how.
She goes to the pub and lets her long hair down
Wild all the way to her hips.
She dances, she sips.
There are treasures buried at the bottom of the sea,
Glimmering, if you want them.
The women her age no longer wait on the wharf.
Their husbands are retired and doted on like boys.
Their daughters, and the daughters of their daughters,
Wait in the cold now, in jeans, feeding the gulls.

BIRTHDAY BOY

I pull myself out of the bath
And look at myself in the mirror
Naked, almost lewd with permission
To look at what's left.

Pecs, belly, ass – all droop and drip
To the sky blue tile.
I am standing on another day.
Another day! Another day!

Look at him another day
And forget how much he's you.
Forget all the times you should have been happy,
Or young, or lovely, or new.

Look upon this fool – forget him.
I am afraid when I shouldn't be
And drunk when I'm not.
What a sot.

As a boy, I was brought to the sea.
Small between my parents,
A hand in each of their own, we walked
On sand as red as Mars.

And they lifted me, leaping
Along the shores of Mars.
We were all alone on the planet.
It had nothing to do with me –

My father loved my mother
And my mother loved me.
I loved the sea.
I was happy.

The wonder, so elsewhere,
Of finding ourselves there,
By a sea so gentle and still and wide
It almost looks like a lie –

That my life is good.
And somewhere behind the pale blue day
The planets of our childhoods
Shift round the sun once more.

I am dripping in front of the mirror
And looking at myself.
Today is my birthday.
I'm alright, I'm okay.

VERLAINE, BY THE END, THINKING ABOUT RIMBAUD

Your mother had a change purse you scoffed at in your youth
And, believing it heavier than death,
Refused to carry around for her
As you trailed her through the Charleville market,
Choking behind the knot of your cravat,
A future man of law and all that.
And she, draped in her public garb, her widowhood,
A black shawl that made her the shadow
That loomed over your life,
She bartered the price of a cabbage down
Like a blacksmith pounds
Iron to the shape of his will.
This was her art: scrimping every franc
To save you from her past
As a child in the dirt of a farm in des Ardennes.
Her errands done, she would hang her shawl
By the door when she entered the house,
Letting it weep there on its hook
In case the creditor should call.
Only you could hate her, Rimbaud –
I heard you died clutching a pouch
Of gold by your festering stump.

Obedient little boy, lawful little Arthur –
Your name fluttered like perfume
From the mouths of the town's good women.
Praise for you was counted, weighed, and measured
To yield a handsome return.
And that is what you knew of love.
You didn't know the stars were asking for you,
Beckoning in their millions of dynamited light
For you to greet your eternity.
Young, you hugged your mother's knees
And pressed your face to her apron
As she patted your head
And explained the chores to be done,
A lifetime's work, taming the dirt.
At suppertime, you showed her the lines
You wrote in your obedience, lines she read
And enjoyed, and acclaimed,
And showed to the good women at church.
Later, when you wrote in the language of life,
She worried for your soul

And redoubled her prayers and chores.
But it was too late, of course,
It had always been so.
A child, enchanted,
You thought cabbages grew on the moon.

Later, it was the world that brushed you from its knees
As the middle-class men de la République
Marched forwards, always forwards,
To sow industry into the land
Your ancestors tilled with petty devotion.
This land is where you came from,
Where your mother came from,
And this is where you're laid to rest:
Where a cabbage costs too much.
Far from the front line of official things,
Which is the death of all men,
You ran, Rimbaud, through the summery meadows
And took to the roots of willows,
And sipped their sap and learned their languor
And borrowed their irreverent slouch.
The stars giggled your name at night.
The wind took care of your hairdo.
You slept among the butterflies
And woke to goats, to goats and their yearlings
Grazing on the green dewy grass by your ears!
O you knew of love then! Dandy of the daffodils,
Your heart was as rustling as the meadow.
But the earth, as it must, returned to winter.
Dust to dust, snow to snow, hunger to hunger.
Tired, sore, the soles of your boots wandered through,
And with only your bright fussy genius to sell,
You made your way to the city,
To me, awaiting.

I am no prophet or wise-man or saint,
And I am half the poet you are in your death –
But your cheap, mulish blood: this is what killed you.
I had nothing to do with it.
The moment you heard the stars at night...
You went where their voices reached,
Further, much further than you could afford,
To find them laughing at you.
And I, refusing to grow old, simply fell in love.
I know the hole I shot through your hand
Is the hole where love seeped out.

This is love! you cried, astonished
And wrote from the wound after that.
I threw myself at your knees
As you grinned at the rooftops of Brussels
And thought of your next meal.
I wanted to live in your youth, your mouth, Rimbaud
But it never belonged to you.
Pretty things never do.

Don't get me wrong. I'm glad you're gone.
But a part of me, this old disgusting body,
Yearns for how deep the bullet went.
This is love, you cried.
So riddle me with bullets.
This stale, monkish room
Is nothing compared to the hell of you.
Every night, after I get on my knees
And pretend to give thanks to the Lord,
The rough old nurse tucks me in
To piss-stained sheets, and I,
Flecks of old porridge dried in my beard,
Think of you, Rimbaud,
And turn you into an elegy, over and over,
With these four lines, always, at the end:
Come back, Rimbaud, come back.
My nurse is dumb and fat.
And I am old and I am dying.
My words have all meant nothing.
I can hear you laughing.
You laugh like the morning,
Like the wind chimes at my window,
High and clear and free, sharp like crystal.
It is the sound of a boy laughing
At the solemn age and toil of monks
Reciting prayers as they stoop in the garden
On a bright Sunday morning in the churchyard.
Look at the boy go, Rimbaud,
Laughing among the tombstones,
A poem on every one!