Mistakes Were Made

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ABSTRACT

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The abstract is a concise account of the poems in the thesis. The poems are small pressure chambers, within which dwell narrators who are sometimes untrustworthy, sometimes lost in their own thoughts, but trying to get at something that seems important. All irony within is secretly poignant, all humor is secretly serious. All lines on this page are double-spaced. The conclusions reached so far exist in a general state of ambivalence, getting at a truth that is always partial and incomplete, but not unknowable. Contents are fragile. Contents may shift. Contents under pressure.

Approved: _____________________________________________________________

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I feel defensive about the comedic impulse, as though humor is often seen as a fault in poetry. Humor is an affront to a certain poetic sensibility, an indication that the poem doesn’t matter and isn’t getting at something deep. Humorous poems don’t have to lack emotional resonance: humor can be a way of adding pathos to a poem, or of leading the reader into an emotional connection with the text. In other art forms, too, humor and pathos go hand in hand: Robert Mankoff, the New Yorker’s cartoon editor, offers a corollary to this idea when he talks about how he selects cartoons for publication:

The funniest cartoon is not necessarily the best cartoon. Funnier means that you laugh harder, and everybody’s gonna laugh harder at more aggressive cartoons, more obscene cartoons. It's a Freudian thing. It gives more relief. But is it a better joke? To me, better means having more truth in it, having both the humor and the pain and therefore having more meaning and more poetry. (Carlson)

For Mankoff, “better means having more truth,” meaning, and poetry. Jokes that don’t get at the truth aren’t satisfying. That makes sense: of course we want jokes that get at the truth. If truth and poetry can make a cartoon better, maybe the converse is true and humor can make poetry better — can give the poem more truth and meaning. This can happen in a number of different ways; in my work, humor often expresses a view of the world in which the comedic is inseparable from the poignant and meaningful. Humor can provide critical distance within a poem through which the poem can deal with subject matter that would otherwise be emotionally overwhelming or potentially sentimental; humor can provide a framework by which the writer can undermine the speaker’s attitude and observations about the world.
Of course, humor can sometimes work to undermine pathos by distancing the reader from the text or making the poem’s moves too explicit. And humor can be simple silliness that is unrelated to getting at some truth. But my intention is to write so that the humor of a piece enhances, rather than distracts from, the pathos of the text.

I do take a view that humor in poetry still needs to be justified—if the poem is to be considered serious (in the sense of “consequential” or, maybe better, in the sense of “making a genuine observation about the world”), but I should acknowledge that humor has been around in poetry forever, and there are lots of funny contemporary poets, many of whom come out of the New York School tradition. I’m not attempting to justify humor in general as much as examine what it adds to my own work.

I. Humor as an invitation to pathos

In conversation, joking can help us get a handle on traumatic experiences. My friend used to joke about her grandmother’s Alzheimer’s, saying if she didn’t laugh she would cry. There’s a distancing that happens with humor as a coping mechanism, but that distancing can also be a way into the poem. Humor helps us deal with things that are too sad, and it can help us deal with them — and can help us get at the truth of them — within a poem.

So sometimes humor will make a serious and/or potentially emotionally devastating situation more palatable to the reader. The funny aesthetic is skeptical of a direct appeal to pathos, and hopes to demonstrate a critical distance toward the serious emotional stakes of the poem. In a poem about love, such as my poem “In the Film
Version,” readers might be skeptical of an emotional appeal which seems overfamiliar, that of the lost love. That story seems so completely done that it’s hard to say it in a fresh way. I could say it straight, even in the third person, but the situation itself is so familiar to us and so potentially fraught with sentimentality that it seems better to parody the situation and use that parody to implicitly acknowledge that this is a familiar story. Acknowledging that familiarity demonstrates some critical distance from the story itself, which I hope, in this case, makes the reader more likely to believe that the speaker has some insight into the situation, and perhaps also more likely to empathize with the characters in the poem.

“In the Film Version” tells the story of Paul, who goes to his ex-girlfriend’s house to try to win her back before she gets married. But after the initial introduction, the poem shifts to an alternate version of a situation, if it had been written as part of a romantic comedy. Common movie characters and tropes are employed, and the poem casts not just the situation but the characters as movie clichés: I introduce “movie-me, the best friend,” along with another friend to whom I don’t give a proper name, instead introducing him as the third guy, tagalong, gait slightly loping, he’s the one who makes funny comments, totally useless in a fight, but in a lovable way, we’ll call him the Foil

The comedy here makes light of Paul’s heartbreak. It imagines a happier ending while acknowledging, through the self-consciousness and explicitness of the romantic-comedy genre, how improbable the fantasy is. The self-consciousness of this move is enacted by references to various forms of movie-magic: the characters drive through a formation of cars called the zipper, illustrated with Xs running across the page, and they get to the
airport “in forty-five seconds” to find the ex-girlfriend before she catches her flight.

We’re familiar with the movies and we’re familiar with the situations, and the
conceit here isn’t just a joke: the invocation of movie-life as a substitute for real life is in
some way a comment on the way our lives are shadowed by pop-culture conceptions of
what we’re expected to experience — we see movie and TV versions (and read book
versions) of love and loss before we ever experience the real thing, and our real-life
expectations are formed, in part, by what we see in art. The idea that real life doesn’t
measure up to movie life is demonstrated and stated by the poem. That is an obvious
point, it seems — nearly as clichéd as the simple love story — but remains an
inescapable aspect of contemporary life; by enacting the difference in a funny way the
poem attempts to give that point some emotional urgency. But more than that, the conceit
attempts to give urgency and sincerity to the real-life situation, ending the poem by
contrasting the real with the fake:

but there is something else, too—

in a year or so,
Paul and I are having a couple of drinks
and one of us mentions her, telling a story
and there’s a quiet moment
and I can tell he means it when he says, about the breakup,
You know, it was better this way.
Not-film-version me doesn’t have pithy advice,
so I just nod. It doesn’t matter if he’s wrong.

The humor which has preceded this earnest and serious stanza is fun and funny, but its
most important purpose is to get us here, to the earnest and serious moment, and to add
emotional resonance to that moment.

In “In the Film Version,” humor is a self-conscious move acknowledging the
fiction of the poem; my hope is that the humor in the poem, though intentional, feels intentional in a genuine way. That is, rather than trying to make a serious situation funny, it’s possible that the humor in a given situation is already there — either intrinsic to the situation or to the speaker’s worldview and/or voice. There is something funny in this view of the world, and the poem generates and recognizes humor within the situation, rather than merely recognizing its poignancy. That seems useful. It’s not just that humor gets us to the poignant; humor is part of the speaker’s view of the world. The poignant and the funny are mixed up with each other, both in that laughter is one response to stress and that both are true. Showing them both makes the poem a more complete response to the world.

II. Undermining the Speaker

In the long list of things humor can do: humor can be a way for the writer to ironize the speaker of a poem, for the author to show his relation to the speaker and to the speaker’s state of mind and/or point of view. The speaker in this kind of poem is unaware of the fact that he’s being funny; his argument, words, and attitude are undermined by the writer. “The Proofreader” is a piece of this type, in which the speaker takes it upon himself to provide “suggestions for revision” on a breakup letter from his girlfriend. The reader is meant to understand that the speaker is a jackass. The disconnect between the reader’s view of the speaker and the speaker’s (inflated) view of himself causes laughter. Why does it cause laughter? Discomfort? Laughter.

The condescension of the speaker would merely be discomfiting if it weren’t clear
that the author doesn’t share the speaker’s attitude. The speaker — his name is Bob, so let’s call him Bob, but it’s not me — offers some introductory comments, then begins his feedback by praising his girlfriend’s use of the dash — “It’s a tricky piece of punctuation.” By offering to give feedback at all, and by beginning with such a particularly condescending bit of praise, the speaker’s character is established as a pompous buffoon. The humor is doing the characterization here, or perhaps is part of the dramatic irony of the characterization. The speaker goes on to offer another condescending bit of criticism, telling his girlfriend, “You say you feel ‘like a zombie.’ It would be better to say you are a zombie, rather than ‘like’ one. The simile there takes away from the power of your metaphor.” At this point the reader begins to sense that Bob isn’t just pompous, but that he’s actually missing the point altogether. So there’s dramatic irony here—the speaker is revealing things about himself of which he’s unaware. But what makes that dramatic irony funny? And why is it important that this piece be funny, rather than a simple attempt at characterization of a proofreader?

The humor here comes, I think, from making the dramatic irony surprising. Once we understand the premise, the details need to be increasingly sharp in order to move the piece forward. Making the details funny is one way of making them sharp. Accordingly, the speaker reveals his own attitude toward women when he suggests that the potential other man in his girlfriend’s life is revealing a “latent homosexuality” because the new man, in the girlfriend’s words, “knows how to talk to women.” Some aspects of Bob’s character are revealed by the quotations he chooses to include from the girlfriend’s original letter; his dismissal of her suggestion regarding his “pathological avoidance of
conflict” lends credence to her claim, and the disconnect between his own perception and
our perception as readers is funny.

Later, Bob quotes the girlfriend again, bringing up a reference to his impotence.
The danger here is that some of the jokes might just be trying to be funny, without
enough substance behind them. The impotence joke has the potential to be cheap and
obvious, but I’ve kept it in the poem because of the second move, when Bob brings up
the impotence again to dismiss it, suggesting that it’s a statement on the human condition,
where “our collective ‘impotence’ is a metaphor for social stagnation and the increasing
disparity between rich and poor.” It’s a ridiculous assertion, and the reader is meant to
understand it as such—as a defense mechanism of which the speaker is not aware. The
speaker’s dismissal of something as specific and personal as impotence as merely a
metaphor feels like an important moment for the characterization, which justifies the
joke.

Another funny thing in the poem is Bob’s use of clichéd writing advice. “Imagine
a wider audience” is a normal suggestion for a piece of writing, but is of course
completely inappropriate for a breakup letter. Praise such as “Good work there” reveals
Bob’s general condescension, while the more explicitly revealing sections — when Bob
responds directly (after a fashion) to the girlfriend’s concerns — are more specifically
revelatory regarding the relationship. Moving between these two kinds of dramatic irony
keeps the piece from becoming too predictable. I hope.

The temptation here — and the potential danger — is for it just to be funny. Then
again, not every single piece needs to be a definitive statement on the human condition.
But I hope that the portrayal here is real enough — as a character study — that we have a modicum of compassion for the proofreader, or some idea that his faults are reflections or exaggerations of a genuine concern on the part of the reader. A sympathetic reader might feel himself or herself to have the potential to act like the speaker in the “The Proofreader” — to be dismissive, or to condescend, or to miss the point. Is the poem a serious reflection on that state? Possibly. A less exaggerated character study might be able to present a fuller portrait of Bob, but it would probably have to give up some of its humor to do so, and it would have to provide the reader with critical distance from the speaker in some other way. In this piece, the humor provides the perspective on the speaker — and at the same time, makes it something more than a bitter condemnation of this type of person. If there weren’t the potential for real concern or sympathy or genuine investigation at the center of the piece, I think the humor would fall flat. If the piece is truly successful, then the exaggeration and humor won’t prevent it from having real implications for an analysis of the type of person who would think and/or act this way.

III. Concluding Remarks

Within my own work, humor acts in several ways. It can make a serious and sad situation more palatable. When a direct approach on the emotions might be resisted by the reader, humor enacts and demonstrates critical distance from the subject on the part of the speaker; later, when the poem does invoke pathos, the reader is more likely to trust a speaker who has demonstrated his own critical distance. In other poems, where the writer’s perspective differs from that of the speaker, humor can be a way for the writer to
show his relation to and critical distance from the speaker and the speaker’s state of mind and/or point of view. Funny isn’t the opposite of serious after all. Humor has its limitations, but it’s not opposed to pathos and genuine insight and observation into human experience.

And this is the end of the essay.

MISTAKES WERE MADE
Oh dawn you are so marvelous and so sweet particularly in the summertime and you display many colors in the sky—

These things are so difficult and I get nervous so please bear with me. The difficulty for you is that at some point you will find your attention lapsing and if I make eye contact I might notice this.

That sounds like a difficulty for me more than for you.

If you feel your attention slipping I recommend nodding at random as though you are listening to and understanding what I’m saying.

That will help us get through this.

Oh dawn, the manner in which you fork— I don’t know why I wrote fork

So there I was. The dawn. The dawn is like olives in a field of four-leafed clover—clover.

Let me start that again.

It has a little epitaph here which I didn’t read.

Being a straightforward and honest accounting of the good looks of the author &

Being a rigorous demonstration of his technical skills at the keyboard

Aubade to Dawn.
How marvelous and sweet you look in the morning light to the eye and also to the ear, with the many birds singing as is they do—

We’re just going to move on.
Ambiguous Statement Alluding Tangentially to the Conceit

Canny but deliberately ambiguous. Self-effacing, coy, funny, funny, funny:

poignant. Funny. Poignant, poignancy implying a general statement about the world
and the way humans behave toward one another. General statement about the world.
Slight redaction of that statement through irony,
serving to undercut the broad statement
while reinforcing a smaller, more incisive
version of the truth it conveys.
Funny and poignant and charming end
which you then have to live like you believe.
Highway 1

Let me tell you about a lane of trees we saw along highway 1 in California.
The steady wind off the Pacific had contorted their branches to one side, away from the highway.
R. and I stopped there for a bit and took a few pictures.
On the other side of the trees there was a field for skeet shooting with a sign that said something important or funny or poignant. I can remember feeling that but I can’t remember the sign.
I may have a picture of it somewhere.
And there was an unbroken clay pigeon on the ground which we took with us down to San Francisco.
Which was sad because to be demolished means everything to a pigeon.
So later we threw it off the hotel balcony and it shattered the windshield of a car.

At the edge of the Pacific, yes, but I hate the Pacific, its ubiquitous power stranding us like the stranger at a party by the punch who won’t stop making conversation. I’d much rather we created our own mightiness than name-drop the Pacific. Like the time I met that rock singer in a parking lot. He posed for some pictures with me and R., the pictures never came out. I still regret that, not knowing how to load film properly and the film store that ruined them too.
What was his name? I can’t remember it.
The wind that day was inexorable I mean unbroken which in this case affected nothing greatly.
All this happened just a few months before her father was diagnosed with cancer.
In The Film Version

My friend Paul goes to his ex-girlfriend’s house and rings the buzzer: no answer—she’s already left, getting married in a few days but

in the film version
this is the moment where

two guys come around the corner
in outfits that don’t quite match but which do complement each other:
it’s movie-me, the best friend,
the one with good advice about relationships, whose sense of timing will set the stage for Paul’s successful last act,
and our other friend, the third guy, tagalong, gait slightly loping,
he’s the one who makes funny comments,
totally useless in a fight, but in a lovable way,
we’ll call him the Foil and

in the film version the Foil says—
she’s on her way to the airport,
let’s go catch her—so we hop in my ride, Paul’s driving,
weaving through traffic on the highway at speeds not in excess of 30mph but it will look more like 80,
the other cars are arranged in a formation called the zipper,

```
X  X  X  X  X
X  X  X  X  X
```

we get there in 45 seconds but her head—instantly recognizable, even in a crowd—has just gone past security, so I, with a genius for improvisation difficult to convey here, arrange a diversion (the Foil protests, is overruled) and Paul gets through, catches up to her, tells her—

with an honesty and vulnerability that has been building in him,
he tells her everything he should have said to her earlier,
has always known—and then they drive home in my car as the Foil and I are detained by airport security.

Yes—that’s the film version
but today, she’s already flown: here, a moment too late really is still too late, but there is something else, too—
in a year or so,
Paul and I are having a couple of drinks
and one of us mentions her, telling a story
and there’s a quiet moment
and I can tell he means it when he says, about the breakup,
You know, it was better this way.
Not-film-version me doesn’t have pithy advice,
so I just nod. It doesn’t matter if he’s wrong.
Product Recall

The house is uncanny in its ability to stand up,
the river in its ability to move continuously.

A fish out of water is drab.
Something interesting about life itself.

Something new, the way the earth moves in stages
through a violent reawakening.

The way our lymph nodes sing to each other
like rabbits in tall grass.

The second-place chanting of every forgotten urge.
The city in lights on the horizon.

These things:
start it with a human perspective and emotion.

You know the feeling. In Rhodesia the second-best trumpet player
is having trouble with the high notes.

I remember this from Ulysses.
I remember this from elementary school, fifth grade, Mrs. Wheelbarrow’s class.

Even the remotest moments like just before falling asleep.
The television glistens in the moonlight.

The remote in hand glistens like the seascape.
Rem sleep is a state of inertia.

I was having the dream where there’s a troll guarding the bridge.
Stop me if you know this one.
I was having the dream of endless war — stop me if you know this one — which was a lousy way of saying anything, but this was back when everything was lousy with terrible import anyway. There was a war going on, though it never seemed to intrude the way we thought it should. It reclined in the background of life like the mountain looming behind the city, and I never really thought about it. Instead I thought about how I should be thinking about it, and I worried about that but it wasn’t really a big deal. I wasn’t going to be drafted and people were going to die whether we stayed or whether we left and the we in our us was something less than inclusive of me so I was like “I don’t know what to think.” Although I did have an opinion. I just didn’t know whether I was right, and if I mentioned it to someone, they might say “Well have you considered this,” or “You’re being too polemical,” though the latter wasn’t really a problem since everyone I knew agreed with me, which made me suspicious, since we’d never been right about anything before, or agreed on much except that life was difficult but mostly good, and we came out in favor of beauty, and generally agreed in principle that killing was bad. Everyone knew that anyway, which meant everything not already known felt unknowable, and if you did know it you couldn’t change it anyway, so we raised our glasses to the troops, and we raised our glasses to the new candidates, but to be perfectly honest we were going to raise them anyway. It was our way of saying “Enough!” which was our way of saying “Perhaps if I ignore this long enough it will go away on its own” which was our way of saying “You intrude so readily, my dear, but I wish simply to have a small nap and then perhaps some tea on the veranda” and that was a platform finally we could get behind.
Field Guide

The white supremacists are not charming
so when you are traveling and see them in a bar, say, Linda’s,
in the middle of the gay neighborhood in Seattle
do not think it would be amusing to chat with them.
It is not amusing.

They are difficult to spot, hidden as they are
among the species *scenus hipsterus* which populate the area;
their only distinctive markings are a predilection for the word *they*¹
and their love of sweets.

Do not be drawn in unsuspecting
and do not ask them as the unwary traveller will
what they are speaking of
and if Matt says the Jews control everything
there is a moment of silence
in which you should not laugh
because laughter is a form of aggression for their people
but stay in that moment
appreciate that moment for its incredulity
its peculiarity of course

Yes it is strange,
but what then?

These creatures are easily startled and caution is preferred,
so first, grasp firmly to your Jack & Coke with one hand
and finish it in one long lift.

As a wary traveller—by this point you should be—
show only a polite skepticism and ask why they believe.

If you are lucky you will get to hear the call of these rare creatures
which is—just as you expect—
a rush of URLs and acronyms and political philosophy
and Corey talks fast,
later he’ll reveal his step-mom is a Jew, and she’s okay,
later he’ll say in a way that intends to be comforting,

¹ As in, *They have an office in the Pentagon monitoring communication; They control our foreign policy*, etc. For a more extensive discussion in this area see Edward Dortmund’s seminal *Mating Habits of the American Nazi*. 
We don’t hate all Jews, just the Zionists,
they’re like a cancer, and what do you do with a cancer?
you cut it out—
which is crazy and frightening enough in itself
especially with the notion that he’s doing his own best impression
of a calming and reasonable voice

which is a curiously calming notion
drawing bright lines in the way things differentiate themselves from each other,
a beer is not a whisky and even, traveller, if your guide book
lacks some clarity on the minutiae of the culture
it is comforting to have this sense of the missing reasonability
differentiating the traveller from the travelled.

Then Matt says
about the websites that Corey is recommending,
Those guys are unreliable
those guys don’t know what they’re talking about
they’ll post stuff that’s unverifiable
no, go to this website instead
and when he said that it’s weird,
because you get the impression that he has some sort of line
defining reasonable discourse from unreasonable discourse
and provable fact from conspiracy theory. He has this line
like all of us, maybe, but
everything he thinks about the world,
about AIPAC controlling the Pentagon,
whatever—

it’s all on the other side of that line for you, traveller,
and for me. Way on the other side. And that makes sense;
we may remain comfortable with that,
with our utterly normal and mainstream line. And the truth, wherever it is,
is somewhere around the neighborhood we live in.
It doesn’t even get out to where he lives.

So there’s that. But it is strange, right? It kind of makes you stop
and wonder about the knowability of truth and all that,
our ability to make sound judgments,
to convince each other about important things
If you’re like me you think about that for about one second,
then continue on with your day,
comfortable with your handle on the world,
in a general way of course.
Just like maybe he—the smart one,
the white supremacist—stopped and thought for a second
about whether he really had a handle on the world
but then shrugged it off
with, let’s say, not just incredulity at my naïveté
but also some sincere regret.

then the girl—what’s her name? Lara? Laura? You won’t catch it
—they’re leaving and it’s a relief—
she may pull you aside for a moment
and say “It’s a lot to take in, isn’t it?”

and maybe her eyes flash a little too quickly
and there’s a small moment when Matt looks slightly jealous
or maybe questioning of her commitment to the cause,
her sincerity—
it’s a momentary relief, and then they’re gone,
which is a longer relief.

Clutch your guide book tightly to your chest,
traveller, and carry on,
continue about your evening,
have another drink and enjoy the night.
Retrofit

I’m bringing back air quotes,  
bringing back the egg drop,  
along with Hypercard, the gin fizz,  
Ferris Bueller, *The Breakfast Club,*

fifteen separate styles of pants, the color “atomic green,”  
and other things, too: the mesh-back cap, the bowler hat, the fedora,  
and gold chains, some dances: the Charleston, the Foxtrot, the Twist.

All the old wars, too: Vietnam, Korea, World War II, World War I.  
I’m recreating civil war battles down to the last detail,  
tracing the history of the powdered wig,  
of the isosceles triangle, of geometry  
when it still held the key to some prime mover’s intentions,

in the hope that this, our measure of the past,  
our perfect dioramas, our scale replicas,  
Venn diagrams of our discontent,  
papier mâché mobiles of our losses,

will help us build a reasonable facsimile of happiness.  
Let’s try it again, run it one more time,  
this time we’ll switch to clean energy,  
count the votes properly,  
pay down the national debt,  
pick careers that are satisfying and lucrative, or maybe just stocks—  
We’ll drive 80’s-era Volvo wagons, pale green,  
be stronger, faster, better versions of us,

or what passes for us,  
except with automatic door locks and brand new tires.  
Our new 2010 models will see the inevitable for what it was—  
old, outdated, outmoded, overtaken.  
We’d make the same mistakes over again if we had the chance,  
so better leave it in their capable metal hands. One day they will arrive.

For now, let us walk together into the evening. The snow crunches under our feet,  
and the sidewalk up ahead is so heavily salted  
that the moonlight and the street light reflect patterns of constellations  
of some galaxy not visible from Earth.
a momentary lull
Poem with Green Scarf

There’s a second before the second she walks by
when she is approaching
through the dusked light of the hallway
when I know before I know
that I’ll catch her eye,
the delightfully catchable eye of a stranger, woman
wearing a green scarf—incandescent in this light—like there’s a spotlight on her,
she walks by. I am aware that this is obvious
but the feeling is so strong, and
no one knows where it comes from.
A feeling not of sexual desire
but of desire much deeper: deeper than sex, or language.
Can Ahab say what draws him to the Whale?
Wait, he does, didn’t he. Still, he follows.

So there’s that feeling, yes, but I and presumably you
are smart enough to admit, even to ourselves
that it would be stupid to threaten or betray a serious relationship
in this case my girlfriend
for a momentary attraction. Even feeling a pang of regret for that relationship
seems stupid—so I watch as she passes
and—consumed by ambivalence—think to follow, half-seeking her to notice me,
half-seeking proof of some fatal flaw to dispel this momentary illusion.

It’s as if

more than the plain knowledge of hats and coats
or the familiarity of the love that’s known
over this there is some excitement, which is natural
a longing for something new, which is natural
and also an idea of some sort, a deep need,
unfound, unfulfilled, silent wreckage of an ideal
not spawned by Hollywood—that would be too easy.
They just mine the pathos that already exists, and it’s not
a bad pathos, either: The desire to be known and understood
which seems more real in the abstract
than in actuality.

Not knowing this, yet, but with
the cowardice of habit, I don’t catch up to her, don’t engage her
in conversation about (I imagine) our mutual favorite movie, Punch-Drunk Love, or
the connection we feel, kept secret, to Watership Down. But later in the night,
seeing her again, noticing maybe her nervous hands
I recall, even in the flux of infatuation

giving in to the feeling of helplessness
that the difficulty in knowing
another real person is,
yes inescapable but. There is
joy that comes with that difficulty, yes—
deeper in knowledge than an evening or a conversation—which may be true
although in the dim light of evening
it feels less than compelling. I think this for another minute or two,
then turn back from my contemplation and approach her table,
resolve steeled, to say hello. Where she sat there’s
left not even the wisp of the scarf she didn’t forget,
no coded signal of connection unmade,
proof of our unshared reverie.
Whom It May Concern

Dear Stephanie Jones,

whoever you are, reading this, accept my sincerest regrets:
I used to have your job, reading letters
for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation—
so I know Stephanie’s just a name
to keep you safe. It’s your job, as it was mine,
to read the distress calls of the unmetaphorically wounded
and to politely decline their requests. I think of you as the department of no.
Are the letters still mostly handwritten, and does that seem odd?
It is not odd. It is strange.

Each morning the plastic USPS bins pile up by the counter to be sorted,
separation of the paranoid screeds
from the friendly advice, rants from requests, advice, want,
each of them a testament to a beautiful and sad narcissism
of the concerned. Then there is genuine need, too—
there is a woman with cancer or with a son with cancer,
her insurance has run out, GM closed her plant,
she’s mortgaged and double-mortgaged, then writes
on spiral-bound notebook paper, tears it out,
cuts off the jaggies with a pair of kitchen shears,
sends it off. In a few weeks or a month she gets a letter back
regretting, having taken her request under consideration,
must declining, sincerely.

So many letters like this.
Their prayers went unanswered and they died, many of them, probably.
There’s nothing you can do. You have to read
and tell them no, which is at least an answer—
but you also should know,
the letters have never been for Bill. They are for you,
and their thin therapy of discontent and longing
is the story, Stephanie, of us, our worthless sympathy,
our own longing and discontent and hope.
From the Book of Complaints

Lord, forgive us for bad music played on acoustic guitars.

Forgive us the djembe.

Forgive our extended metaphors about the most exciting five minutes of our lives and their relation to the first five minutes of eternity.

Forgive us for taking *Narnia*—though it deserves to be loved—as a theological guide.

Forgive me for thinking I'm smarter than the pastor and being arrogant enough to know I'm right.

Forgive me for my disdain at his corny jokes and his reluctance to translate from the Greek, a reluctance to ask us to understand the nature of translation if we are to take seriously the word of the Lord.

Forgive me for reflexive skepticism of authority and certainty. Forgive me for disbelieving in hell as an incentive for faith.

For asking forgiveness though I think I'm right, though I let that elitism keep me from those who love you,

for hating the forgiven for—though I would want to share it—their litany of simple devotion.
Means of Production

I think of myself as a non-practicing mathematician, which comes with a certain nobility. It is quite simple to say that we type on screens and read things from screens and that the distance from the physical seems important and it probably is important, but what does it mean? The list of things I have made with my hands is quite small. I buy my milk from the store next to Wal-Mart which is just to say we are removed from the making of things, from making, as far removed from the means of production as, too, we are from Algebra, we are the last legs in a very long assembly line, an innovation of Henry Ford, who was anti-semitic, not that that matters for our purposes, merely that it seems absurd or silly to try to get a handle on this world or what anything means and not to mention brand names and famous people. Otherwise what do I have left, my own little life among the brand names, traveling between entities, from supermarket to computer to the milk and car and lamp and bar with whiskies and sodas and beers. Name the objects not the brand. I understand that impulse. I love you, my toaster tells me, but I don’t think it’s completely sincere, its voice quavers, like we’re making up after a fight and it needs that reassurance.
Radio Edit

Tonight it feels like there must be at least six billion people in the world.

He asymptotically approaches the snow with dread, not wholly satisfied with the realization that

driving through falling snow at night equals falling through hyperspace.

A bobviousity conveying simply that on any given night: but particularly tonight

other languages might convey him more curiously or clearly, meaning the same thing he means only smarter.

The sine qua non of a radio so loud as to drown out all conscious thought. A song but not the particular song he sings to

might teleport these feelings more clearly or beautifully: though not as clearly or beautifully

as hitting the steering wheel with moderate force and saying fuck, fuck, fuck.

A people, he forms a community of people: sitting and thinking these same thoughts somewhere tonight,

here or elsewhere, these thoughts or thoughts so like them as to be indistinguishable.
Reminder

The buttons on the pumps at the gas station don’t follow principles of usability. The arrows point in arbitrary directions.

And the car next to my car is pimped out in a way which most days cries out for ridicule. Today, though: today this car isn’t a marker for excess of USA or macho vanity but instead a testament to humanity—our fragility, our beautiful egos. It is moving in its way, let’s say, a purely physical way, but.

I go inside, they don’t have my energy drink of choice and I see the juice-based beverages in the cooler and am reminded that only last week I insulted Juicy Juice for being 90% apple juice in front of my friend who likes Juicy Juice and gets it for free from the people who give away food to people and gives it to her children and I am reminded that I spend half my time making ludicrous elitist claims about things I don’t know or even care about, and the other half of my time is spent trying to take those comments back into my mouth, to swallow them—

but today I brush off this regret as the cost of doing business as a human. Let’s remember our humiliations without trying to forget or shy away from their dark reprise, uh, I mean, of reliving them or being reminded of them.

My brain invents humiliations out of ordinary circumstance. It suspects them lurking around street corners.

It grows them like a petri dish. We all cope in different ways. My brother doesn’t go out without his wig on, mohawk freshly glued. It’s not shallowness. No one cares about looks: we care about being humiliated.

To know us is—careful now—not to know about the various humiliations, but to know that we seek and make humiliation almost instinctually. You have to keep reminding yourself to take a step back.
To be happy and relieved and take joy.
Everything requires joy. Almost everything deserves joy.

That long slide of mediocre days: remembered, but inconsequential. Among all this is a joy and humor in life like the involuntary smile after locking eyes with a girl you like who likes you which is an apt metaphor if it is carefree and simple.

And I want to say this all cleanly, without irony or whatever it is that normally pervades us—I mean me—this joy was what I was thinking of just now, just now that we were talking.
Grandfather Poem

The important thing is just to do it.
My grandfather is hospital room and bed and funeral.

The time I went to visit my grandfather in the hospital.

How small he looked. I have never seen anyone so small. After six weeks.
Still in the hospital after six weeks is bad odds. Place your bets before
the next stanza begins.

I have never seen anyone so frail.

Of course we came to visit: we came to visit. He was stupid from drugs and not coherent.
I remember my father, my dad standing over his bed and calling hello, dad, hello. My
father the doctor talking to the nurse on duty or taking over and changing the
medications, like that was a thing to help—but it was the only thing to do, so he did it,
otherwise there was just nothing. The rest of us stood and watched. I left the room, sick
from seeing him so skinny and pale.

I just visited once—I was away at school—

I remember the doors of the hospital elevator, I think, opening into a window that looked
down into a parking lot or a park. I can only remember the window, not what was
outside, the metal frame was black and I touched the window and it was cold, even for
September. Windows cold to the touch, conveying the sense of parting. Elevator doors
closing quickly.

I had left the room already, sick to my stomach. He was so small and finally ill. At the
funeral, too, of course, idiotically, obviously, he didn’t look well—but this was surprising
somehow—

* 

After the funeral we ate. By italian tradition, and my family, and my
uncle, who has no sons, were eating. I no longer felt sick to my stomach: this is a month
later. Why were we eating. We were the last to leave the meal

Out the door, out the door, into the bright warm October air, late
October, almost Halloween.
I put my hand on my uncle’s shoulder on the wait out the door
(a line had formed) (he held the door) and wanting to thank him for—

I will not surrender this moment to anything, not an inability to speak in writing or poetry, except that the fear of not knowing what to say or having anything to say is the same fear now and then. Wanting to thank my uncle for

Holding the family up and together and for being the first-born son and for helping my dad and for being strong. I will imagine and pretend This was all said in a look. I hope, I imagine it was said, or was begun to be said—

*

My grandfather, like me and not like my dad, wore thick glasses. But
did he like to read? He didn’t like to read, that’s fine, maybe too he didn’t talk to my dad much—your question is
did he—ever—talk to my dad, of course the answer is yes, yes of course, but really talk, in words that matter, did he ever open himself emotionally and speak words from his heart, or listen to words from my dad’s heart—

these aren’t really questions for funerals. Funerals are for Arthur is in heaven now and fond memories of when we were young

so he never liked to read—
though this is not about him never talking to his son, this not about parallel lines, this is not trigonometry. This is subtraction, but not quite even that.

Is there resentment between my dad and my grandfather? This is not about resentment. This is not about working blue collar long hours in one factory for thirty years and at the end, at the only time I knew you, not quite really communicating—too big a word, too much a concept rather than the action: you sit on a couch and you watch John Wayne movies and you sit in a chair or we talk a little, you call me Bobby, grandfather I call you.

Is this talking? Is this what I want?

What we all want is more communication, with the dead, with the impossible. We want fraternity, paternity, we want happiness, peace. To feel the easy connection that I feel longing for in my family.
As if, finding these things inexpressible, or expressible but intransient, unchangeable, I had no desire to continue.

*

He was dumb from drugs. He was left incoherent. He was at least incoherent. Tubes. Metal. Bed. Brokenness, pity, despair. A lack of communication, a lack of getting well. This. Everything here said, says

this is not a place for getting well. But this is not a place to die, either, this is in-between. This is a place to be kept, to fade, to wither, incoherent

or to stand with your arms at your sides feeling sick to your stomach listening to the hum of helping machines and wishing yourself better, better able to cope and love, express love, to talk in ways my grandfather never—never?—did. Not really.

This is not getting all of it. Am I talking to a new believer or am I talking to someone who’s established. How will you measure this? Next week, how will you know?

Not to be deceased, not to succeed or fail, or to stand beyond the end of a bed with no answer, neither able to fall or to overcome the sensation of falling (with details or images we could help you mourn, you could communicate to us this place or what made you feel like this).

Staring at the moon in the night sky. Venus is the brightest thing there, besides the sun, besides the moon. Beside th heavens. No more images. God cannot show his face right now.

*

But because I had gone to a conference in Indiana but because I was afraid of you when I was small but because I wanted to talk to you but quickly became uncomfortable around you and then because I felt bad for not wanting you around, for not being comfortable—

or since you watched TV all day and never—did you ever?—

notice really us, I thought, I thought this was the effect of working hard for so many long hours for so many years and being so poor—
but I didn’t know what to tell you. Because this work doesn’t make your life. This not-talking, this non-sense is the cause and I will not be a third-generation effect. I will talk.

But because I had gone to a conference in Indiana and stood in a tree at night, looking at the stars and because I knew how much God loved me and you, because I stood silent in a tree talking to God and listening,

because I said to myself—this is what I said to myself, now for the first time, for the first time or at least for this time, this knowing myself loved—how trite. Continue—makes me able to love someone other than myself and it’s for the first time, without insecurity, without fear, now I might possibly know what that means or face that possibility. I take that privilege, I claim that gift and will love you, grandfather, old man, dying man, dead man.

* 

I want to remember him the way he was, they say. Only I don’t. I want to remember too how he looked in the hospital and in the casket—smaller, not whole, not him, I swear—I want to remember who was in the hospital, who is in the coffin—not my grandfather, not the man alive, real, not pale, not thin, not skewed. The real grandfather had already disappeared, vanished like in a trick only he was lost slowly, in six weeks, in the hospital.

He was already gone by the time I got there, by the time I visited.

In the funeral parlor my thoughts of raising the dead are forgotten. This is the new creation.

I want to describe him sitting on the couch in more detail.
I want to describe getting to the visit of my grandfather in the hospital in more detail, in concrete detail. Getting there. And back. Wake up grandfather wake up if he is just the changed man—

Visiting hours are over.
Viewing hours start at four o’clock.
I can’t help but notice
there’s a guy in a Pavement t-shirt here,
it looks curiously brand new,
one more mild irritant in the crowd of shaggy hair and no-lace Vans.

Not only is my favorite indie rock singer now famous,
he’s first-name familiar with highschoolers and hipsters
and all the fabulous looking people of Indianapolis.
I shouldn’t mind the success. It’s just that

there’s a flavor-of-the-month sensation around it.
The crowd has an air like it’s a coronation.
But the kid to my right—look over there.
The kid with shaggy hair pushed forward, wearing no-lace Vans,
he’s looking at the ticket stub in his hands
and just kind of crinkling it between his fingers.

I can’t hear the sound of the paper from here
but I remember it
from maybe five or so really great moments of anticipation
before a show, before seeing someone whose music has helped you
in some important way, or meant something deep and personal—
I can celebrate this experience without irony.
It aches with meaning, this kid, beautiful in his way.
Let me tell you something.
It doesn’t matter that like all of us he will die. It doesn’t matter
that he will someday die
or that he will forget this or have forgotten this
moment completely, for good, during the excruciating last days of his first marriage,
ten or fifteen years from now.

Why doesn’t it matter? It’s not that I’m capturing it—
if we’re relying on me to capture beautiful moments
and put them in a book with some serious words
then we’re headed for disappointment.

No, the moment—this one, like countless, infinite others—
will fly away into the vast nothingness.
It will disappear into the ether along with the ten best conversations of my life,
and your life,
or the moment when I gave out Pop Rocks during a friend’s bad wedding, or the hilarious conversations I’ve had with Dan, or the moments of vulnerability. Why doesn’t that disappearance matter?

It’s not that these experiences weave themselves into the great tapestry/communion of human experience—though they do—or that they give us hope and joy in our lives—though, again, they do.

It’s not that. That’s a sort of justification these experiences don’t require, being complete in themselves—just as the pomp and circumstance of the hype of the musician can be a way of missing the point.

It’s not that these things are opposed to recognition, just that recognition is so removed as to be confusing, irrelevant, and inconsequential. Whether they’re remembered, or forgotten, nothing is added, nothing taken away.
I have eaten the poems that were in the icebox
Sample Cover Letter

(Feel free to use any of this if it seems helpful.)

My dear person,

Please hire me. Give me the job to which I am applying for. I know what it is. It's something that I can do. I can do it because I have numerous skills and accolades. These make me qualified. MORE THAN qualified. If you know what I mean.

I hope that you will answer this quickly because I could use the money.

Thank you,

Robert James “Cantoni”
At the computer in the kitchen I play Pacman and I’m trying for the high score. If I die on the first level, most of the time I quit, frustrated, knowing my goal of 50,000 to be out of reach. I know exactly how many points a perfect first level is worth, and it is this perfection against which I battle. While I play my mind is not tied up and so I think of poetry, I think up a poem, very poignant, about how writing poetry is like Pacman. I pretend to know what writing poetry is like to achieve this effect. I pretend there is a standard out there, knowable, perfect. I continue playing while I do this and I continue to fail. If I make it past the first level with a perfect score of 14,800, I make a mistake on the second level. And so I understand that the poem in my head is a failure, will be a failure, though it isn’t written yet. While I am thinking and failing my roommate comes into the room and writes “Please wash your dishes” on the white message board. I am in the room, I can see him writing, I can read the words and suddenly I’m not failing—I’m mad, because I am doing more important things than the dishes, although really, considering, I might succeed at doing the dishes, instead of failing at poetry and Pacman over and over again. As I am apt to do all night. I brush aside the thought, instead pausing the game, then erasing the message from the message board. I leave a barely legible draft of my poem in its place.
Dear Emily,

I enjoyed reading the letter you left on my coffee table. You haven’t shared your writing with me since the beginning of our relationship (was I too harsh?), and it’s a pleasure to see more of your work. This one is a much better effort, and if I wanted to flatter myself I might take some credit for your improvement. In any case, I’m always happy to give you my feedback; this particular piece has a lot of promise, and I have some suggestions for revision that I think you’ll find useful.

You make a strong start in the first paragraph. I particularly applaud your use of the dash. It’s a tricky piece of punctuation.

You say you feel “like a zombie.” It would be better to say you feel you are a zombie, rather than “like” one. The simile there takes away from the power of your metaphor.

Your mention of your neighbor Henry digresses from the topic of the second paragraph, your desire to “make things work.” If you want to mention Henry, tell your reader more about him. What is he like? Where does he live? Is he oafish and unattractive? You hint at his homosexuality when you say he “knows how to talk to” women. Expand on this. Details like these will keep your reader invested rather than threatened by the mention of another man. On the other hand, you might want to exclude Henry from the piece (and your life?) altogether. As presented here, he seems flat and irrelevant.

I like your use of “But” to start a sentence in your third paragraph. It’s OK to start sentences with a conjunction for dramatic effect! Good work there.

Your fourth paragraph needs a topic sentence. You include many disconnected subjects: my “impotence” and “complete lack of sexual function,” your “frustration” and “anger,” my “pathological avoidance of conflict” (and can such a thing really “kill you”? Avoid hyperbole). Choose the most fundamental issue—in this case, the unreasonableness of your fantasy of “genuine intimacy”—and make that the subject. Forget the rest. Also, avoid the second-person address here—imagine a wider audience. What’s really frustrating is the human condition; our collective “impotence” is a metaphor for social stagnation and the increasing disparity between rich and poor.

The ending is a bit abrupt. The last line—“I can’t live like this”—is ambiguous and clichéd. Stronger is your postscript, “I’m sorry, for both of us,” though stronger still would be the simple “I’m sorry.” Say what you want to say with as few words as possible.
A significant revision is in order, but don’t be discouraged. If you’re not married to all of your original ideas, I can see this going in interesting directions. And regardless the quality of your work, I will always be

Your Faithful Reader,

Bob
Before Clocks

This was a song before it was a refrain before it was a notice tacked to the front door of the house on the clever side of town.

He picked up a passenger and went out to breakfast. He’s in love with breakfast, like so many other meals. Coffee gives breakfast an edge.

Before it was a rhythm, the beat of the music on his headphones which cannot be adequately expressed in words,

the day he started writing exclusively in equations
to regain some sense of clarity: house needs = toilet paper + bread

relationship success = beauty + rapport + funny.

Surrounded on all sides.

He was dreaming of a world which fails less palpably.

It’s not the clock on the wall with the hands that go round: it’s the stopped kitty clock that the baby likes.

These are going to sell like hot cake.
To his exes:

He is sorry for responding badly to your pain:
He is not good at this.

When next you meet he hopes to be demonstrably thinner.
We can burn that bridge when we come to it.

Thinking about the bad things that could happen to him and don’t and how lucky he is and has been and how that luck might continue to hold.

And the good things which might one day happen but which are still just a possibility. For the moment he would like simply to turn the wheel which pours whiskey into a small glass. Is that OK.
Probability

Twenty-seven roads diverged in a yellow wood
and I had the chicken masala.
It was bland.
Two damsels in distress hollered at me from far-off towers,
their cries intermingling in the milky air.
I was lethargic for spring and now it is spring.
Two apples, one orange, three competing ideals of beauty,
what we've lost, what we've won, what we’ve eaten.
I was demonstrably adorable.
Five radios tuned to the same station
but slightly out of sync,
playing ads for thirteen career opportunities,
the cacophony of thirteen chickens perched in a dead tree.
The question of how they got up there.
There were five salads which didn’t have any salad in them, only mayonnaise,
reflecting each other like looking into the pool of water in a tub,
a tub so deep, a blank so blank it's as if you wrote it.
I was malarky and spinach, but pretend I didn’t say that. Blank the rest of it,
the beauty of blank muttered under my blank.
Night fell, thirty-seven moons rose into the sky
with a light three times brighter than day.
I went back to the mossy clearing but the paths had multiplied
and the minotaur and the centaur and the salad bar remained aloof,
hearts hardened like eggshells,
unwilling to point me in any direction but leftward, always leftward.
Monty Hall was there with three hundred doors,
an infinite supply of goats which he eliminated one by one.
I chose, then he let me change my pick.