

SMALL BAR

A thesis presented to  
the faculty of  
the College of Arts and Sciences of Ohio University

In partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
Master of Arts

Brock Guthrie

March 2005

This thesis entitled

SMALL BAR

by

BROCK GUTHRIE

has been approved for

the Department of English

and

the College of Arts and Sciences by

Mark Halliday

Professor of English and Creative Writing

Benjamin M. Ogles

Interim Dean, College of Arts and Sciences

GUTHRIE, BROCK. M.A. August 2005. Creative Writing.

Small Bar (49 pp.)

Director of Thesis: Mark Halliday

Small Bar is a collection of poems completed during Guthrie's graduate years at Ohio University. These poems, often written in a conversational style, take as their primary subject our daily interactions, whether between intimate friends or mere acquaintances, and consider the ways in which we respond to a world that is humorous, absurd, and often uncompromising.

Approved:

Mark Halliday

Professor of English and Creative Writing

## Table of Contents

	Page
Everything's Relevant.....	5
Small Bar.....	15
He Quits His Blue Collar Job.....	17
Shiver.....	18
Digging.....	19
The Long Run.....	21
We Like Sam.....	22
Weight Room.....	23
Driving There.....	25
Spring.....	28
Birds and Humans.....	29
To the Candy Dish at Lincoln Funeral Home.....	32
I'm the Asshole.....	33
Catch and Release.....	34
Walrus.....	37
Something.....	38
This is This.....	39
Appropriate Interjection.....	40
Quiet Down.....	42
Elderly Couple in a Mexican Restaurant.....	43
Some Days.....	44
Poem About Love.....	45

## Everything's Relevant

I think I continue to write poems because I've written a good one or two. And the praise feels nice. I know the impulse to be a poet comes from the desire to be an artist. It's a rock star impulse: to make something, something cool, and to deliver it. To find admiration, both from myself and from others.

Recently I met the very cool actor Sean Penn at *Molly's at the Market*, a bar in the French Quarter of New Orleans. He was in town shooting for his upcoming film, *All the King's Men*, having beers with one of my writing professors, a writer who sells a lot of book. As the drinks went down the compliments came up, and I asked Sean how it feels to be the leading male actor in Hollywood. I wanted to know what it's like to get the nod (the "automatic nod," I said) to play Willie Stark, one of the most memorable literary characters of the twentieth-century. He said it feels great, no doubt about it. "I love the novel." The best part, he said, is the admiration that comes from people who are better than him—smarter or more talented. Then he said something that made a lot of sense, even to me, writer of mediocre poems that have won only (gratefully) the respect of dear friends and the hearts of dreamy women. He said he'd rather have that same kind of peer admiration as a writer, specifically as a poet. Even without the same kind of fame?

Without the fame, no doubt about it.

I told him I agreed. And I do. I believe I'm permanently fixed to write poems—I constantly seek them to read, constantly obsess over what would make a good one. I can't think of a more honest answer to the question of why I write: I write to gain the admiration of those I admire in return. I write to belong to a community, to entertain great poets and make them think about this or that subject or character. Subjects and characters *I've created*.

That said, I suppose my ideal poetic voice or persona, at the moment, would be something close to following: Me. Talking. To a smart friend or group of friends, whoever really—I'm totally comfortable . . . as intelligent as possible . . . at my wittiest, funniest, and aware of all the possibilities of my subject. I could say anything. Everything is relevant.

This almost never happens in real situations, let alone in my poems.

There are some poets out there, past and present, who seem to try for a similar effect, more or less. These tend to be the poets I admire most, the poets who are generative for me. Immediately I think of Kenneth Koch, Mark Halliday, Denise Duhamel, Tony Hoagland, Raymond Carver, James Tate, Jim Daniels, Stephen Dobyns, and Barbara Hamby among others.

Even within this group of mostly narrative poets there are still extremes to speak of. On one end we have poets who are indeed conversational, who make us think “people could really talk like that,” but who are a bit more contrived, whose poems display a more noticeable artifice. My gut instinct has C.K. Williams, for instance, leaning toward that side of the spectrum because his poems are loquacious and yet they tend to embody such a rigid process of discovery, an almost formulaic rising to occasion. Poem on, poem off. Even further is Stephen Dunn, whose poems I once enjoyed quite a lot for the easy, colloquial diction, the cocktail party acumen, and the seemingly effortless meter. Here are lines one through four of “Optimism” from *Different Hours*:

My friend the pessimist thinks I'm optimistic  
because I seem to believe in the next good thing.  
But I see rueful shadows almost everywhere.  
When the sun rises I think of collisions and AK-47s.

And here are lines nine through eleven:

I've learned to live for the next good thing

because lifelong friends write good-bye letters,  
because regret follows every timidity.

The poem begins with a matter-of-fact, chatty first couple of lines. Although they're carefully measured, each with six feet, I can imagine Dunn or someone like him making such a statement over coffee or a beer. The next two lines, however, are only believable within the context of a poem. If during a bar-room conversation Dunn was to follow his first sentence with, "But I see rueful shadows" and "When the sun rises I think of collisions and AK-47s," I would get suspicious. I'd wonder if he kept a journal on his desk at home with something like, Things to memorize and say glibly when certain topics arise, written on the cover. If I were to stick around, order another beer, maybe agree with Dunn's drift and say, "You know, me too, Steve, I've learned to live for the next good thing too," and he promptly replied with, "Sure you do, because lifelong friends write good-bye letters, because regret follows every timidity," I'd plan an exit strategy.

I'm not exactly criticizing Dunn's poetry, except to say that I find the conversational poems from his side of the spectrum less interesting than those that hang around on the other side, a side where the poems, if not spontaneously written, sound as if they could be spontaneously spoken. Here I'm talking about poets like Koch and Halliday and David Kirby. Maybe Kirby is the most extreme example of the "talky poet" of those visible today. I sense that one of his ambitions (one which I share) is to make everything relevant. Take these opening lines from the first poem of *The House of Blue Light*, "Strip Poker," set in a blood bank, a characteristically Kirbian location:

I'm giving blood and looking at a magazine photo  
of bosomy Ava Gardner next to that squirt Sinatra  
and remember saying, "Want to play strip poker?"  
to my mom when I was eight because I thought it was a game,  
not a way to get naked, and was ready to put on

lots of layers that hot July evening—

What saves such tedious language (“to my mom when I was eight because I thought . . .”) from turning into prose are the quick bounds of imagination that precede and follow it. The transition from Ava Gardner to “Want to play strip poker?” is believable enough since the two ideas exist within a sexual domain. One could argue that it’s a stretch, but I think Kirby’s voice, his personality, carries the reader along, pities us in the way some poetry—I’m thinking of a certain type of contemporary *avant-garde* poem—doesn’t. It’s this inclusiveness, both of subject and kind of reader, which I admire in Kirby’s poetry. In two and a half pages, “Strip Poker” moves tactfully from the mother’s polite refusal to the poker request, to Kafka, to Stalin, to tightrope walker Karl Wallenda, to Sophocles, and finally back to the blood-bank, where Melba, the nurse, asks Kirby whether or not he is a runner. Kirby tells Melba no, and asks her “why does she want to know,” to which Melba replies, “Because you have a pulse of fifty / and if you have a pulse of fifty and you’re not a runner / often that means you’re dead.” I take Kirby’s insistence upon drawing so many subjects into a poem that’s “spoken” in such an easy voice as a friendly, even loving gesture.

But while I like the rambling discursiveness and the poem’s spontaneity as it moves, I think the spontaneity might be undermined by how Kirby frames the poem too neatly within the Ava Gardner anecdotes. To begin with a photo of Ava and then jump in the next line to a memory of asking to play strip poker is great. It rings true. I can see how a creative mind might make that kind of odd leap. But then Kirby forgets Ava for a page and a half, only to return to her conveniently with, “deep down, Ava darling, we’re all pretty superficial and beautiful, too, in or out of our clothes.” As a way to tie the poem together, this ending feels wrong, not only because it’s a bit trite as a piece of wisdom, but also because the



framing technique—and we’re all guilty of it—seems to be a little forced. I want to be mistrustful of such tidy, “meaningful” endings in talky poems, especially in the poems of someone who talks the way Kirby does. It seems slightly counterintuitive, in that it makes a discovery which, even if the poem’s earlier content “earned” it in a traditional contemporary poetry sense, doesn’t stay true to the spontaneity of the mind that’s thinking.

On the other hand, this could be a case of Kirby accommodating his reader, a loving gesture. Maybe he hasn’t taken for granted that his subjective associations will be delivered to the reader as they were to him, and so by closing off the poem in tidy fashion, Kirby limits the suggestiveness of his poem for the sake of clarity. This is something I struggle with in my own work. I think that when a reader finds that the central “meaning” of one of my more inclusive poems is obscured, it’s probably because I’ve failed to limit the suggestiveness. I understand, too, that if I was to find in a poem the quality that made it *equal* to a voice speaking, with the spontaneity *equal* to the way thoughts enter our minds, it would have to be an illusion, or an Ashbery poem. After all, poetry is artifice. But I often wonder just how far the discursive poem can go, how close it can toe the line where artifice meets . . . what, sincerity?

The idea of sincerity arises nearly every time I consider where I stand in relation to contemporary poetry. The disorder I see in so many poems of experimentation, poems difficult for difficulty’s sake, seems to undermine communication as a virtue. That doesn’t seem very sincere. What about the clever, highly marketable, can’t-go-wrong “gimmick” poems? That can’t be sincere, can it? One of my favorite poets, Raymond Carver, wrote one, “The Car”:

The car with a cracked windshield.  
The car that threw a rod.

The car without brakes.  
 The car with a faulty U-joint.  
 The car with a hole in its radiator.

And so on for 46 more lines of mishaps until finally we get the payoff:

The car waiting on the back lot.  
 Car of my dreams.  
 My car.

It's a genuinely wonderful poem, sincere in how it rings true for anyone who's owned a used car, anyone for whom the idea of buying a new one is a pipe dream. And yet one feels that as soon as Carver had the idea for the gimmick, he had a poem. I thought, "lucky bastard," the first time I read it.

Sometimes I think, "I'm a genuine guy, my friends certainly think so, and my poetry will reflect that. Just write." Perhaps I should rest assured that my audience will find at least such and such poem of mine to be sincere. But I'm not sure what that means, *sincere*. If it means "telling the truth" in poems, I'm almost never wholly sincere.

I've often taken "real" as a compliment. By "real," I imagine my admirers could mean a couple things. They could mean that I write about things that really happen. The real world. Like James Dickey or someone? They might mean that my subjects are "real," that they're out of character with much of "unreal" contemporary poetry: I often write about working, hard luck, sex, drugs and drinking. Are they saying I'm real in the Bukowski sense? Good god.

So which kinds of poets are sincere, real, both? Maybe it's more useful to consider which kinds of *poems*. I've always loved a certain kind of poem that flirts dangerously with insincerity, even insensitivity, but when done right clearly resembles the opposite. For me, C.K. Williams has always stood as a paradigm for the flagrant, voyeuristic poem, the poem

that says, “I will look at so and so and their misfortunes and feel things. I cannot turn away. But I will not do anything about it, for in my smallness I cannot. Except, that is, to offer the vision.” I can’t think of a better example than Williams’s “Harm,” from *A Dream of Mind*, one of my all time favorites:

With his shopping cart, his bags of booty and his wine, I’d always found  
him inoffensive.

Every neighborhood has one or two these days; ours never rants at you  
at least or begs.

He just forages the trash all day, drinks and sings and shadowboxes, then  
at nightfall  
finds a doorway to make camp, set out his battered little radio and slab  
of rotting foam.

The other day, though, as I was going by, he stepped abruptly out between  
parked cars,  
undid his pants, and, not even bothering to squat, sputtered out a noxious,  
almost liquid stream.

There was that, and that his bony shanks and buttocks were already stained  
beyond redemption,  
that his scarlet testicles were blown up bigger than a bull’s with some  
sorrowful disease,

and that a slender adolescent girl from down the block happened by right  
then, and looked,  
and looked away, and looked at me, and looked away again, and made  
me want to say to her,

because I imagined what she must have felt, It’s not like this, really, it’s  
not this,  
but she was gone, so I could think, But isn’t it like this, isn’t this just  
what it is?

I want to say yes, that’s what it is, that’s the real deal. “Harm” is sincere, I’d argue, not because it eludes artifice—I’ll concede that’s impossible, except in the most unlikely situations, as when one writes in one’s sleep. I think it’s sincere because Williams take the poem through an emotional test and discovers there’s an underside to the sweetness the

poem feels for the homeless man at the beginning. I've often thought that's it, that's the poem I want to write, the poem that turns a seemingly sure speaker's expectations upside down. I've tried it unsuccessfully many times. But I wouldn't have written "Harm" the way Williams did, exactly. I might not use "shanks" and "buttocks" and "redemption" in the same sentence. I'd probably find a shorter way to say "testicles."

While I figure out what that word means exactly, *sincere*, or if it's even desirable, for me, to be that in my poems, I suppose I'll continue to work under two very rudimentary guidelines. They involve content and aesthetics. For content, simply, I only write about things I know, in a way that makes it seem as though those things truly happened, even if they didn't. As for aesthetics, I aim for clarity. I prefer the swiftly musical line break that swings you through a poem, like in Barry Gifford or Jim Daniels, though I'm fond of the Carver fragment, the period at just the right place. Above all, I try to write with words I can imagine myself speaking, in a manner that's characteristic of me. When I'm uncharacteristically witty.

All I've said so far brings me to a dilemma, one I've felt over the past few years, one that has affected my poetry output and that routinely affects my confidence, really, regarding anything I have to say about the subject, a dilemma I can picture other beginning poets facing. It's why I'm generally soft spoken in person. I think a scene from *Easy Rider* illustrates this dilemma, for me, however obliquely. Early in the film, Fonda and Hopper stop at a ranch run by a sixty-something white man with a twenty-something Mexican wife and several children. They pull up on their motorcycles while the rancher and his older hand tend to a horse, and Fonda asks if he can fix a flat tire. The rancher and the hand are somewhat suspicious, but gracious, and offer the drifters a meal. Hopper is asked to remove

his wild-looking Stetson before they pray and eat. The uncomfortable silence is broken by the rancher inquiring about the two bikers' origin. "LA," says Fonda. "When I was a young man," says the rancher, "I was headed for California, but well, you know how it is." Then Fonda replies, "Well you sure got a nice spread here." The rancher tries to play down the compliment: "I sure got a lot of them . . . my wife is Catholic you know." And Fonda reiterates, "No, I mean it, you've got a nice place. It's not every man can live off the land you know. Do your own thing in your own time. You should be proud."

We aren't offered a reply, but left to revere Fonda's statement, as though he's said something truly visionary, and yet we sense that if he considered it much longer, he wouldn't even believe what he's saying. I get squeamish each time I watch this scene. Who does he think he is—this twenty-something kid? Isn't it a tad disrespectful to tell a man more than twice your age something he already knows, and tell him in a tone that presumes the thought never crossed his mind? That's how I feel when I throw my small voice, my poems (which certainly represent only a fraction of the poetry I *feel*), out into the poetry world, while thousands of other poets have already done the same, *still* do the same, each one thinking he's got the goods. It's tricky when you realize how little you know now compared to what you will know, all the while trying to figure out if the poems are any good, or all wrong. When history tells me I've been wrong so many times, it's amazing I ever utter a word.

*“You can never go wrong as long as you tell the truth.” This according to my good friend Gary and his wife Pam, but mainly Pam, who’s a helluva cook and generous about it too so she’ll always have my full attention when she wants it.*

**Small Bar**

When I walk into a small, country bar  
in a small, Western town,  
my Stafford shirt collar loosened, neck-tie  
curled in my coat pocket, I can tell right away  
which cowboy at the bar  
might like to kick my ass. As I can also tell  
which woman smoking in a far corner booth  
might like me to touch hers  
in a way that, perhaps, it's never been touched.  
Like this place. Up front,  
a twenty-something redhead  
who oughtta be in pictures  
fondles some guy's thigh as he leans  
over the pool table. The guy, maybe fifty,  
sinks the shot, straightens, removes his cigarette  
then sees me without exactly looking.  
The room is antipathetically smoky.  
The only person behind the bar  
is sitting on a stool with an acoustic  
and I'll be damned  
if just as I put my cash on the counter  
he doesn't begin "I've Got Rights" by Hank Williams Jr.—  
singing in an easy baritone  
to a bar row of maybe six and a corner booth  
of about three. *That the bartender?* I ask,  
intentionally ignorant, of a powerfully obese man  
I soon find out but already kind of figured  
is the owner of "Coop's Bar and Grill."  
Coop tells me Hank Jr. will be with me  
when the song is over. Which is fine  
because I'm in no hurry. I've reserved a room  
down the road. The conference isn't until 2 o'clock  
tomorrow. I look over the hard liquors  
as Hank plays that song and another.  
I order Old Milwaukee instead,  
which I think is a good choice  
because a husky voice somewhere down the bar says  
*Good choice man*  
but then I hear  
*Really—Good choice*  
only this time more forceful  
as if my initial nod was inadequate  
or offensive, here in this small bar.  
This is the cowboy I mentioned earlier.

How to respond?

*thanks man I truly like this beer  
it's what I drink in Ohio when I hunt  
sort of a tradition  
but it's whiskey when I fish  
many trout in Tongue River north of town?*

Or, less tactful:

*look fucker my folks didn't get along either  
and my stepdad, the bastard,  
looked an awful lot like you*

But I'm in no mood to chat like that.  
Not to save my ass.  
Or plug these pigeonholes.  
And he can tell. He can tell  
I just came for a quiet beer. Or to talk  
to the women in that booth over there.



## He Quits His Blue-Collar Job

He walks right into the office,  
uses the word *menial*,  
then walks out whistling,  
feeling nervously loose  
in the same way a beautiful woman  
can make men speak or be speechless,  
make them pause at the gas station,  
say hello or nothing at all.  
Then it starts raining  
and he thinks of Raskolnikov at the bar  
early in the book. Confounded.  
But after one drink the clarity that came  
like a gravity to pull him back up  
so he could ripen for the next fall.  
Feeling relatively benign, however,  
he walks into the West End Tavern  
with a newspaper under his arm  
and nods reluctantly  
to a guy in the corner he knows  
who's become so misanthropic  
he ends conversations with headbutts.  
Then he orders a beer and says *menial* glibly  
to the barmaid who grins  
in a way that makes him think  
she's heard something truly visionary.  
And when the drunk across the bar shouts *amen*  
he immediately thinks *beggary* and knows  
he shouldn't call his wealthy uncle  
so he opens . . . closes the classifieds,  
drinks his beer and drives home,  
suddenly alarmed and slightly panicked  
over what might be in his mailbox,  
whose voice on his answering machine.

## Shiver

In a dark bar that sells breakfast we're eating it  
and drinking beer and it's a sixty-degree  
Saturday morning in November.

Carlos says "Let's go drink PBR down at White's Mill"  
and Doug says "You mean down by the waterfall?"  
so Carlos says "Yeah we'll have a good time, have a good time."

But the Corona neon's green and gold light  
shines down on the bar and I'm remembering,  
leaning back with my feet on the counter,

how she smelled and Doug tells me I'm wearing kickball shoes  
which is a funny thing to say because he might be right.

Carlos tries a joke, "A man walks into a bar, asks where  
his friends are, and the bartender gives him a shot and a beer."

Doug looks so sad now he's watching tennis on TV he says  
"I think last night I was truly happy at one point" and I say  
"I know what you mean, man, I remember it like it was yesterday."

Carlos thinks there aren't enough hours in the day,  
he'll have to switch to something harder, and I say  
"Relax man, you have your whole life to drink."

I signal the barmaid, a jovial thirty-something  
whose peach voice alone makes her sufficiently attractive.

"Got a pen?"

On my Heineken beer coaster I write a few lines  
about desire, cap the pen and give it back  
with a serious "Thank You."

She gives me a charmed look and I suddenly feel momentous  
then  
abashed and the woman to my right asks the woman  
to her right if her kids have had chicken-pox.  
She'd like to expose hers early.

I look at my friends to see if they heard this remark  
but Carlos is scratching his back with the butt of his beer bottle  
while Doug talks and gestures grandly, signifying distance.

## Digging

Nippy, vodka drunk and uninspired at your own party you decide to switch to beer. You come out of your serious bedroom, having put on a heavier shirt, and see three of your friends leaving the bathroom, hear one of them say *I was doing it on the way home in Burlington traffic*. You go outside to your porch to get a beer. Snow falls on your shoulders, your head, on the rows of stacked silver cans and on the possum that tries to burrow into your uncovered trash barrel. Standing under the bare light bulb, you're holding it up by the skin at the back of its neck, thinking nothing of significance except maybe how it ain't no thing for you to pick up a wild possum coolly. And just hold it there. Your orange cat walks over curious so you pick him up, too, and show him to the nippy possum. Cat meet Possum. Nothing happens. They must know each other. Your cat wants to go inside where it's warmer, so you put him down and he runs in through his cat door. Meanwhile the possum hangs motionless, is laboring intensely, you imagine, to hang motionless in your grip like a big boot. When you blow in its ear it hisses like Dracula so you drop it and it buries its head and two of your friends who are watching from inside decide they've seen enough, go back into the living room where everyone else is. Good for them. You're in this for something. You can see the scaly, prehensile tail. When you brush the marbled gray fur white with your hand it stays white like that until you brush it back gray. Now the possum goes deeper into the trash, nearly out of sight, so you leave it alone and piss your initials in the snow off the porch, wishing it well and murmuring softly *way home, way home, way home in Burlington traffic*. Then you sneak into the guest room upstairs, lock the door, and fall asleep on the floor reading Chekhov and thinking how difficult it would be to convince anyone how truly important the past half-hour had been.

*When riding bicycles down steep declines, handlebar brakes are okay, but pedal brakes—which allow you to tap your foot down until you find that point where you can feel the tire’s friction vibrate up from your sole to about your knee—are more satisfying.*

## The Long Run

This morning Bart comes downstairs  
combing his wet hair,  
slips his sneakers on,  
takes a duffel bag from the closet,  
spins around, shuffles his feet  
and shimmies his way  
out the back door which swings  
then stalls against the placemat.  
Five, ten seconds tops.  
“What the fuck was that?” I say to Adam,  
who tells me Bart has plans  
to shoot paintball guns  
with his nephew, Billy,  
for Billy’s birthday.  
“Little Billy’s four, correct?” I say.  
“Yeah, four, what’s your point?”  
“Nothing,” I say.  
“Teach ‘em early’s the best way,” Adam says.  
“Safer in the long run.”  
“I think you’re probably right,” I say.  
“Small arms and such, you know,  
pellet guns, 22’s,” he says.  
“I totally agree,” I say.  
“What are you saying?” he says.  
“22’s, crossbows,” I say.  
“You calling me a redneck?” he says.  
“Hope Bart picks up beer  
on his way home,” I say.  
“Who the fuck do you think you are?”  
“And cigarettes,” I say.

## We Like Sam

Sam the-short-tempered, Sam the-sometimes-irrational, has an argument with his landlord over where to grow his pot plant. “Not on my property,” his landlord warns him. But the landlord’s nephew mows the lawn early Saturdays, so on Sunday the landlord scolds, “The bed of your pickup is still on my property.” Sam bikes up the backroad he lives on looking for an accessible spot away from the property, a clandestine spot with above-average sunlight. Instead he finds a freshly dead red fox straddling the road’s shoulder. Sam reaches down with his left arm of above-average length and raises the fox by one of its back legs, holds it high like the prize he thinks it is, smiles on three girls driving by in a convertible. Their fresh faces spoil. Sam is embarrassed, spits on his shoelaces, but in a moment of clarity takes the fox to his landlord’s doorstep, leaves it there with a note that says: *Thought you could think of a better place to put this.*

## Weight Room

*"They ain't got enough weight in this room for me"*  
is what that guy curling 90's over there  
might be thinking.

And that woman walking in now who could kick his ass  
wears a t-shirt that says *Get off the couch ladies*.

Which is what I've finally done,  
though my shirt says *Heineken*,

and my shoes say *Adidas* (toe touches, side bends).  
Jim asks me what we should work on today.

"Our height Jim," I say. "Or maybe . . . our eyesight:  
that girl doing lunges. See her ass. There it isn't."

Jim taps my shoulder, "Over there, man, the big guy."  
Captain America calf tattoo, ankle weights,  
a frat shirt:

*You may not like us . . .* (front)

*But your girlfriend does* (back).

That bald guy to my left just might be an albino.  
To the girl he's spotting on bench press he says,

"Life, Lil, is a soap opera. You're either part of the cast  
or you're sitting in the audience."

Lil starts to laugh, fins her flipper, goes jelly-armed.  
With the barbell pinned to her chest she shouts,  
"Get it, Hugh, not funny!"

Hugh thinks it's funny, teases a little, says  
"Tell me I'm right, Lil, tell me I'm white."

On my way to the water fountain  
I shoot Lil a smart look,  
quick point my finger at Hugh and say,

"Hey man, what's up."

*Shopping for a home entertainment system at Best Buy, the salesperson puts it like this: "You can have the KLA, or you can have the Cadillac." The damn guy trapped me! I sure as hell don't want a KLA! I take the Cadillac—\$700. Three remote controls.*



## Driving There

When driving, you gotta know what the other cars are doing.  
 It's imperative you watch the road.  
 You don't have the option of doing something else if,  
 for instance, you're driving alone  
 and your thoughts turn dull or sour or dark.  
 Sure, you can pull over for a drink, or to hit golf balls,  
 but during that half-hour you're getting no closer to your destination  
 and you're wasting time and you know it  
 and if you're like me you dread driving alone  
 especially when it's an old girlfriend in the hospital  
 four hours away that you're visiting and it's serious  
 so you know in the back of your head  
 you have to spend the bar half-hour or the driving range half-hour  
 all over again, driving, alone. Last night, as usual,  
 I fell asleep reading with the lights on.  
 Woke up this morning considering the drive again.  
 A large orange moth had fallen into the cup of coffee  
 I'd let cool overnight on the nightstand.  
 I picked the dead moth out, laid it on the book I'd been reading  
 and drank the cool coffee. Next time,  
 I'll put the book over the coffee mug or something.  
 Driving now. Before sleep last night I'd read a short story  
 about two kids, a boy and a girl, in a coastal Italian city  
 who were fishing from the shore  
 and feeding the seagulls the paninis their mothers  
 had sent them off with that morning.  
 The boy picked up a stone and threw it at one seagull.  
 I think the word "split" was used. The seagull was a heap  
 of bloody feathers, and blood had spilled  
 all over the rocks and the pieces of bread and salami and cheese.  
 The girl was crying. She couldn't understand  
 why her friend had done such a thing. But the boy  
 felt like he had done something wonderful. After all,  
 he was a younger brother, and he imagined his elder being pleased.  
 But this was only intuition. He wanted to justify his actions,  
 and had a beautiful opportunity to do so, because  
 more and more seagulls circled around, nipping  
 at the boy's arm and at the dead seagull as though  
 they were trying to revive it. The boy knew this was lovely!  
 All of these seagulls paying homage to their fallen friend!  
 It was worth it to kill the seagull, the boy pleaded.  
 But the girl kept crying, which makes me think about that poem  
 my old girlfriend always wanted me to write  
 about a day several years ago

when the two of us were smoking a joint in the archway  
 under Seigfred Hall in Athens Ohio. It was summer, hot,  
 humid, so it would've been cool on the cement steps  
 under the arch, a good place to smoke a joint.  
 But a turkey buzzard flew down and crashed  
 like a paper kite into the graffiti on the wall under the arch.  
 We didn't know whether to laugh, or what. The buzzard  
 slid down the wall, sprawled on its chest and made noises  
 not unlike, say, a baby goat. "Buh." High pitched.  
 Something resembling entrails were strewn in front of the beak,  
 and she was sure it was whatever the buzzard had just eaten.  
 I thought we should kill it, and I told her I'd step on its head,  
 and she said something firm and urgent  
 as though she really believe I'd do something like that—  
 stomp on a live turkey buzzard's head.  
 Maybe I wanted her to think I would have.  
 Looking out from under the arch, I saw the other buzzards circling  
 and I decided it'd be fine to leave this one alone.  
 But she was crying, maybe, but not really, almost laughing, but not.  
 Her brown shoulders! How *there* her small breasts are, now,  
 beneath that gray tank top! No, I don't think  
 I'll ever write that poem about...this is ridiculous.  
 I need more coffee. I'm going too fast.  
 I gotta think about something cool, something funny,  
 something I haven't thought about in a while,  
 like how I used to walk up to close friends at bars, drunk,  
 punch them in the jaw, unexpectedly, in a way  
 that was absurdly funny, a way that wouldn't hurt,  
 but wouldn't not hurt either, tell them I liked them.  
 Then how I started punching not-so-good friends,  
 then mere acquaintances, tell them I liked them,  
 and got beaten pretty well once by a guy with a different sense of humor.  
 After that I turned my humor self-ward, overtly,  
 would pick up a beer bottle, or maybe someone's shoe,  
 hold it under my nose and say "Like my new mustache?"  
 Sometimes if I was blue, watching football or shooting pool,  
 a friend might pick up a cue, hold it under his nose and say  
 "Check out my new mustache" and I'd be like "Dude, no."  
 You see it was only funny when I did it.  
 I wish someone would show me their new mustache now.  
 I'm stopping at this truck stop. Dammit.  
 I'm gonna buy some scratch-offs, a new CD,  
 maybe even a John Grisham book-on-tape.  
 They have *Everything Must Go*, the 2001 LP by Steely Dan,  
 and there's a song called "Pixelina" and one called "Green Book"  
 and one called "Things I Miss the Most"

and in the men's room there's a stall door that says  
"I'll never be in this bathroom again"  
written by Craig Watanabe of Fort Collins on November 13, 2004  
and there's a newspaper clipping  
on the side of the cash register, a mugshot of a guy  
who'd ripped this place off and was recently caught  
and his eyes are eyes I think I've seen before—  
dangerous, dignified, and they seem to say  
"You don't know how it feels to be me"  
and I'm thinking "Yeah, I'm sure you did what you thought you had to"  
and I don't know if it's the lonely drive or too much coffee  
but I look right into that mugshot and say out loud  
"The problem with you is you're not too bright."  
Then I laugh out loud too not because I'm talking to a photo  
but because it would sound surprisingly comical  
if you said that to a friend or coworker  
who always complains about minor but stubborn problems  
like how her boss gives her no respect:  
"You know what your problem is, Barbara,  
you're not too bright." Funny. Surprising.

## Spring

There's golfing. Carlos is not very good, and Doug and I are slightly better than not very good but for mediocre golfers the first time out in any given year is always relatively decent because

you don't have any recent score to compare your current game to so you don't worry as much about what you're doing wrong and you let things come naturally like your first time getting laid after a long without.

Carlos cracks a beer, says today is his day. The robins are everywhere, pulling worms from the fertile March earth. Once, I must have been twelve or less and angry because I'd duffed my mulligan, I threw a golf club

like a boomerang and the grip came around and cut one in half. The grip! Soft bellies. I remember feeling terrible. And wishing I hadn't done it but happy my friend Davis was there as a witness. Which reminds me

of a strange thing I saw this morning on my way to work. A German shepherd trotting across the road in front of my halted car with a small groundhog in its jaws. That be dog eat dog. Like the big black

sweet-eater ants that raided my kitchen last spring and took the poison from the ant-traps back to their queen who's twice as thick and long as the others, who in a gesture of surrender went scuttling across the linoleum

days after the rest disappeared. Like the golf course the bike path that circles it and follows the river is crowded with another first for spring: Men and women jogging. Seems funny to come all the way down by this muddy river

just to jog, though any moving water is better than none. Here go two sets of nice brown legs, but you can't see the asses because of white t-shirts tied around the waists that resemble mud flaps on a semi-truck.

And here goes a guy and a girl running side by side who look like they're on a date. Jogging. Both listening to headphones. I'll bet as soon as they walk into his apartment they take separate showers. Make pasta. Watch Jeopardy.

And here goes another beautiful woman. Doug and Carlos have decided to mark spring with a trip to the topless bars tonight in West Virginia. The twenty bucks I just won from Doug because I knew he'd miss

that three-foot putt would've bought him a lap dance. I'll probably pick up a good bottle of Merlot, I think to myself, suddenly recalling what my girlfriend said when I left about when I get home.

## Birds and Humans

It's July 4<sup>th</sup> and I'm at my uncle's ranch; a thirteen-acre spread  
 with a one-story farmhouse, a pond, a barn, a grass  
 basketball court with a hoop on the barn's side  
 and a kelly green outhouse with one of those  
 crescent moons slivered out of the door  
 so that as you shit there's still a little light.  
 My cousin Mike and I are backing out of the driveway,  
 going for beer and T-bones while fifteen or so Guthrie's  
 wait like bereft Scotsmen by the pond and spitfire.  
 Mike's talking and unrolling a baggy  
 and doesn't know what I mean at first  
 when I whisper a profanity as though I'm a broker  
 watching my stock fall as my son calls  
 from school with a sore throat. The family cat  
 is dead in the road. The strong male. Whose  
 hunting grounds were in the high grass across the two-lane.  
 For ten years he's survived the 55 speed limit  
 on this stretch of Route 646. Only an hour before  
 I was at the pond with the fly rod, calling for him  
 because I'd caught my seventh bluegill, thinking it odd  
 that he wasn't responding. Mike sits in the car  
 as I go to the corpse. A hair tuft rips away clean  
 between my pinched fingers before I think to grab a leg.  
 You see, his side is split. I place Norton under a bush  
 near the road. When I tell my uncle  
 he doesn't seem too impressed. He's seen it before. Better this way  
 than the two that simply disappeared. Discouraged, he goes  
 to fetch a shovel as Grandma, 84, inured to circumstance  
 and exempt from any high drama, smiles  
 while looking at the spot left on the asphalt  
 and then the field of high grass behind it  
 and the sun barely visible above the tree-line. She turns  
 and asks me where my six-year-old cousin Hannah is.  
 If she knows yet. I don't think so. Mike and I take backroads  
 to get those beers and T-bones. In the parking lot  
 of Ray's Shop and Speed a red cardinal flies  
 through my car's open windows, then stands  
 on the hood and flies away noisily  
 leaving a fulsome speck and drawing my attention  
 to the cacophonous evening orchestra of bird.  
 "Listen to them," I request. "All of them."

Birds are crazy near dusk, alarmed  
because they forget to expect the inevitable night.  
It's the same with older folks, only different; how some grow  
bitter and mute near the end, facing the unknown, the dark,  
but with a shade of acceptance." Mike looks at me like *I'm crazy*  
and asks "why the hell are *birds* afraid of the dark?"  
and I almost say "because of surreptitious felines"  
but I realize this is incorrect and I know I'd feel guilty  
if Mike laughs hysterically so I say nothing  
and on the way home we buy fireworks  
from the only roadside vendor in town.  
A man content to just sit there. Spit.  
Wait for that particular darkness  
that comes once a year  
so he can see his livelihood light up the sky.

*One of two gas station clerks is sitting behind the counter like he's on break. He seems to want my attention, coughing like he is and talking about the slim-jim that's reddened his face, watered his eyes: "If I'd known it was gonna be this spicy!" I think he wants a reaction, so I tell him I generally stay away from spicy food. But the thing is, I love spicy food. "I'll tell you what," he says, coughs a little more.*

## To the Candy Dish at Lincoln Funeral Home

Because they make me nervous, I never go to funerals without a good beer buzz. But funeral homes look clean and smell crisp, and since I don't chew gum, even though doing so might preclude me from having to speak and would possibly alleviate some of the tension in my jaw, and since I don't wish to smell of liquor because doing so might seem disrespectful, I'm in need of a breath mint. And in you, oh candy dish, I find my breath mint.

You're the first thing I see as I step lightly into Jaspers Funeral Home, and I want to dump all of your contents into my coat pocket and put you on my head. Or hold you up to my chin and turn to the nearest mourner and say, "Check out my new beard!" But that would sound silly and be construed as rude by the mourner so I simply admire you as you are, so full of candy under the green parlor lamp next to where we sign our names. I take cinnamon, wrapped in fire-red translucent wrapper, and a few other flavors for later. For the drive home.

There's no one here I know except you. You and a colleague of mine whose mother is the honored dead, whose father died a year ago, who's twenty-seven, kind, deleteriously uncynical and receiving yet another long, ephemeral line of well-wishers—rather casually dressed callers who include five or eight vibrant women wearing an assortment of sweet colors like saccharine black but the one who seems especially alive is wearing blue, backless, flowered. She's blonde and apparently, turning now—baby fattened. Above her I see six panes of stained glass. Each bears a message and a biblical image. Here's a goat and words. There's a wine goblet and words. (There's a candy dish in back of me by the parlor lamp. I've got my eye on you.) There's a stained pane with the sun beaming through showing Christ with unquiet eyes and around him in a curiously strong font the words: I AM EVERYWHERE AND I SEE ALL. Everywhere? All of it? *He's* got his eye on you too, then, candy dish. Here's the mother. Overly plump. Heart attack. She probably enjoyed cinnamon, like I do, and cherry and spearmint and licorice and pork and cake, etcetera. No doubt we could've found you half-full in various rooms of her home and you empty in some of her drawers. But unlike you I've never met this woman lying here whose face is kind enough. She honestly looks like she's sleeping, as anyone would whose death was untimely. Heart attack. Obesity. Candy dishes. Refill.

I've only known her son for about a month through work but I think we've shared at least enough in the way of sports braggadocios and car troubles to justify my appearance here at the casket. We even played golf on one occasion a few weeks back. His swing needed work, and I told him so. He'd probably given it about as much thought as removing you from his mother's home. After golf we had beers in a local bar. You'll want to know that since I had work waiting at home I wasn't drinking very much, but I was hungry, so I focused more on your cousin, the peanut jar. A woman at the bar asked him about his mother's health but didn't listen as he explained. Therefore, I can't help but worry he'll mistake my intentions. Or should. Could see my presence here as insolence since he knows enough about me to wrongly assume I stopped by for "material." But when I meet him in line, put out my hand, assume a solemn face like that of William Hurt in *The Big Chill*, I slip him Brach's butterscotch.

He smiles! You candy dish! In a place like this, I don't understand how you can be so full.



## I'm the Asshole

My girlfriend wants me to stop writing for five minutes  
 and talk to her  
 so she picks up a circular, straw-woven coaster  
 from the coffee table, one of the heavy kind,  
 and throws it like a frisbee from across the room  
 and knocks over my glass of burgundy.  
 This makes me look up from my notebook  
 because it's pretty impressive  
 and she's glaring at me, not mad yet,  
 just confident that I shouldn't be surprised by her accuracy.  
 Her eyebrows are raised and her mouth is slightly puckered  
 meaning: she means business, but not really,  
 and that tune from *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*  
 pops into my head so I whistle it  
 and she slouches, deflated, and I continue writing.  
 She marches into the bathroom audibly and  
 I don't know what she did in there  
 because she's back in five seconds and— oh, there it is,  
 the smell of Nivea lotion.  
 I laugh, that's all, and she says  
 "You think you're so clever don't you?" and I say  
 "Isn't there something you should be reading?" and she gets up  
 and stomps to the bottom of the stairs and says  
 "No sex for you tonight." This time she glares mad  
 and as she's going up the steps I hear  
 "And don't write that!" I say nothing to this  
 and I'm reminded of this one time when I was at the mall  
 and I was walking down that long hallway to the restrooms.  
 In front of them at the phone booth was a large angry guy  
 using the phone except he wasn't talking,  
 he was just standing there, listening, angry looking.  
 Finally he said something that surprised me  
 and probably whoever was on the other end. He said  
 "Guess what bitch. Cat's out of the bag!  
 I'm down here at the mall buying your fucking birthday present!"  
 Then he hung up.  
 He turned and saw that I was eavesdropping  
 and I had the impetuous urge to say  
 "You might as well *really* go have a drink now"  
 so I did and he slugged me in the jaw.  
 Then he just stood there like a salt block.  
 And damn did I want to lick him back.  
 But I couldn't do it, because I was the asshole.

## Catch and Release

My cat is an asshole. Impatient. A little bored.  
 Like me he continually goes for the glass of brandy  
 sitting on my computer desk. All evening  
 I've spurned him away with a spray bottle he fears much less  
 than he fears the vacuum cleaner. But the vacuum cleaner  
 is too loud, so I don't use it to spurn him away, even though  
 it would work better, since he fears it more.  
 He jumps up and lands on the keyboard, adding "qqqcv"  
 to the end of "meat thermometer." I grab him  
 and hold him up by the skin at the back of his neck,  
 thinking nothing of significance, except maybe  
 how I'd like to bite his small ear, which I do,  
 and he gives that same expression you give  
 when you're arrested for public intoxication. Those far-away,  
 Keith Richards eyes, as though there's something going on  
 but it's definitely not where you're at.  
*E` non la mia culpa*, he seems to say, which I can understand  
 almost instinctively because last summer I was in Youngstown Ohio  
 for my best friend's wedding, but I wasn't the best man  
 because Jim has a lot of good friends, so he chose a cousin  
 to keep it simple and ego-free, though that guy  
 turned out to be an asshole, and I think it was because  
 he didn't know Jim as well as we did, Jim's buddies,  
 so he probably felt a little intimidated, like we knew something  
 he didn't, such as certain secrets—albeit unimportant  
 in the grand scheme of things—that would've canceled  
 the wedding indefinitely, but he did warm up a week earlier  
 at the bachelor party with the high-priced stripper  
 who seemed to enjoy sitting on his mustache. See,  
 now we know about him. The wedding. Apparently,  
 the night before there was a catastrophe of sorts,  
 a drunken brawl within the bride's family,  
 during which Jim punched his brother-in-law, and the bride  
 and her sister tackled Jim, kicking and clawing.  
 The best man slapped the bride. Tense apologies in the morning,  
 but as soon as I pulled up that afternoon, everyone  
 out on the front porch, Faith No More's "The Real Thing"  
 blasting out of my car stereo, my index finger  
 out the window, in the air, anxieties shifted.  
 Jim's fiancé isn't fond of me. Thinks I drink too much.  
 Doesn't get my humor. Takes offense when she doesn't get  
 my humor. Thinks I can't be offended. Once, I told her  
 "Your eyebrow's over there right there"  
 and she told me impolitely to leave. I don't like her much  
 either. Something about her scares me and she always  
 smells like lemons. She blames me for everything Jim does wrong.

One time they were arguing in front of me about politics and he called her “slut” and she warned him to “say it again” so he called her “cunt” and she broke *my lamp* across his shoulder! See what I mean? I’m cool with that, I guess, but another time, after she found out about his Marine Corps peccadilloes in Okinawa with Japanese prostitutes, she told the girl I was seeing about *my infidelities!* Better yet was the time Jim and I took LSD and he disappeared while I was de-alphabetizing the books on my shelves and singing very loudly “blue-blue-blue-red-red-red” over and over really quickly with “blue” in baritone and “red” in alto. I found Jim in the basement buried under the laundry pile and he was kind of singing the same thing I was, over and over, same alternating ranges, except his words were “I am a man’s man. He is a man’s man.” He told me to go away, so I went and wrote “BOMB” in blue magic marker on a shoebox and put it near him on the floor. When he saw it, he pissed himself, which pulled him out in more ways than one, and said glibly “Now I’m not afraid to die.” Later, we placed the same shoebox in a drive-thru carryout and waited behind some bushes, counting, “4-3-2-1,” over and over, laughing obscenely. We were caught, blue lights red lights, and released, blue fish red fish. I took the blame because I wrote the letters. All of this and more had prompted the opinions Jim’s fiancé and her family have of me that they cling to like starfish to rocks in ebb tide, rocks in ebb tide. At the reception, the bride’s mother pulled me aside, aside, reprimanded me for wearing white socks with my tux, then threatened to cut me off if it came to that. I was cut off at nine when she saw me put a lighter on my head and leave it there as my date giggled. My date: a girl I truly liked, who after only a month bought none of it anymore, and who at one point even punched me in the nose because she thought I’d asked her to. I may have. I was feeling absurdly repentant and I’d had several drinks. When my eyes watered and the blood rushed from my nose I was terribly turned on—it made me want to jump back and kiss myself, like James Brown. I threw off my coat, told her “You’re right: I’m wrong.” She punched me again because she liked me.

*A good thing is standing waist-deep in a swimming pool with several of your friends, each of you with a cocktail, some with sunglasses, some without, evening sun hazy in the southern sky, nobody saying much.*

**Walrus**

*He kept silence severely, and listened intently  
to our conversation, waiting to hear something new.*

Chekhov, from *Head Gardener's Tale*

On contract for a realtor we flipped a coin  
to see who would paint the forty-foot eaves:  
I'd secure the ladder, my partner would climb.  
Another worker, the head gardener,  
came by in a pickup and opened the garage.  
He had things for storage.  
This guy moved slowly, breathed heavily,  
and gave the impression he didn't need to speak.  
He could have been from Winesburg.  
He was one of those people who remind us of a walrus.  
We can't help it. It's the animal's fault.  
I knew he lived alone.  
Couldn't imagine he had a girlfriend.  
Or that he even masturbated.  
And I was pretty sure as he locked the garage  
he'd be leaving us with little more than a head nod.  
When my partner began to climb  
I told him to aim for the bushes if it came to that.  
Then the walrus spoke from behind us,  
held out his arms and flapped his hands,  
said "No, man, go like this."  
I laughed pretty hard. I knew  
I should give him at least that much.

## Something

On the TV talk show a dispute over a fourteen year-old boy  
who made a ten year-old girl  
nervous enough to tell someone.

One woman on the panel can't get a word in. Another man  
of substantial renown thinks the boy should be put away,  
taught a *good, hard lesson*.

The crowd applauds, but there's something in his tone.  
One could say he isn't sure, that his sentiments are ceremonial.

The host won't budge: *They're ten and fourteen.*  
*It was a simple brush-up that led to a complicated complaint.*

*Let's be honest, he says, there wasn't even time for an erection.*

On the six o'clock news a mother drowned her five kids,  
the oldest of which struggled, thought he had a choice.

Chad isn't moved, says *this shit is tired*.  
With the phone to his thigh he asks Rachel if pepperoni's okay,  
looks over at Paul, shakes his head and says *tired of it*.

Paul says *for you Chad*, then pretends to play  
an invisible violin, making the sounds.

Heather tells me there's a damp spot on my rug.

I tell her *I know. There's a seal leak by the skylight*  
*I've been ignoring for months.*

I climb to the roof, poke around. Smoke.  
The gutters need cleaning. I'm throwing leaves  
everywhere.

Just down the road, something to look at—  
the pizza driver braking to give a trembling rabbit  
its ridiculous will.

**This Is This**

A friend of mine just bought a trailer in a park called Bounty Vale. And then, while landscaping and listening to a radio advertisement a guy I work with said, "Isn't it strange how the names of the nuthouses are peaceful, like Echoing Meadows or, like, Scenic Hills?" I told him it's called irony and he agreed. Then I thought of a word I seem to have heard only lately but quite often. Oddly. Like a week of floods wedged between two dry months: *Salve*. So I tried to convince my co-worker that in language, like life, we unknowingly revisit certain themes from time to time. Our ears, our lives, find old sounds and circumstances and make them new, sometimes just by finding them. He said, "I know what you mean, like how every summer we do this we both get ridiculous poison ivy rashes?" And I said, "Right, but this is this, it's not something else." And like Deniro in *The Deerhunter* I held up a sparkplug—the weedeater isn't running: "Let's take twenty and run to Hunter Hardware," I said.

## Appropriate Interjection

Seven o'clock in the morning putting up insulation and wiring electric  
 with a not too close but cool friend of mine  
 and his friend who make plenty building houses for a living.  
 Putting up insulation at seven on Saturday because of a promise made  
 the night before at the bar  
 where the ambition to learn something about house carpentry  
 appeared like a pipe leak. That pink shit makes you itch.  
 Not so with my friend here. He's worked with the stuff so long  
 he sleeps on the shit, wakes up  
 throws a piece in the toaster, eats it slowly with cream cheese.  
 Shouldn't we be wearing respirators or something?  
 How the hell should I know? But this kind of work is good.  
 Callous these grandma hands of mine. Like back in those summers  
 when I tar-sealed blacktop on eighty-five degree early-mornings.  
 And in the afternoons. Even these guys admit they've never done that.  
 On break we smoke a joint in front of the construction site,  
 drink some water, and sit there in silence.  
 Silent like that until I start to count my breaths. And then I recognize  
 the similarity between our collective awareness  
 and the object of our unfocused gazes: Margaret's Creek,  
 running muddy and a little high along the other side of the road.  
 I could try and articulate this thought, it might break the silence,  
 but I'd like to work with these guys on future projects, so instead  
 I tell them how I once caught a five-pound largemouth  
 a quarter-mile up this creek  
 and managed to get *two* barbs of the treble hook  
 from the top-water Rapala I caught him with  
 stuck in my thumb, how I tried for an hour to loosen them from a nerve,  
 fish in the water, gone, pain shooting up my arm, how, finally,  
 I had to push the points through the side of my thumb and clip the barbs  
 with rusty cable snippers. "Sure," I add,  
 "there's good fishing in this creek if you know the good holes."  
 Then my friend's buddy holds out his left thumb, a nubby little thing,  
 tells us about an accident he had with a circular saw.



*I'm sitting at the coffee shop trying to look smart reading The New Yorker but really I'm thinking about how smart I look compared to the other coffee drinkers. Much smarter. My shirt's certainly smarter than that guy's. Mine's plain with horizontal stripes and his, well, his shirt has a picture of James Brown on it, which is not as smart as, say, a Miles Davis shirt or even a Pearl Jam shirt. And do you see my brow? Notice how it furrows just slightly in the center? Intelligence.*

## Quiet Down

The other day at a smart coffee shop  
I was revising my grocery list  
when I overheard a couple arguing  
in borderline whispers  
about another couple, how *that guy*  
writes poems for *his girlfriend*, like the one  
he showed them that was “coarse but clever.”  
From where I was sitting it sounded  
like the woman felt slighted. She said  
“passionless” twice, “but flowers”  
probably twice. *You could write a song*,  
I heard her suggest. So he said, *Okay. Good.*  
*Good idea. I’ll go to the mall*  
*and buy strings for my guitar.* Here  
in my kitchen I’d be happy  
if *my girlfriend* would appreciate seafood.  
She says there’s something about the texture,  
the strong taste that’s “obnoxious.”  
Oh, she’ll eat sushi, when it’s masked  
with rice and avocados, and last year  
I grilled salmon and she tried it, made no face.  
But now it’s a bushel of blue crab, an old  
Chesapeake recipe, and this is really  
important so I tell her that she and the sea  
are harmonious, showing my favorite  
picture: A small photo I keep  
in a case on my key ring  
of her in a sundress, kneeling in the surf  
on a Connecticut shore. She flips it over,  
gives me a look: Another photo I took  
of a King Mackerel I’d caught, a cigar  
in its mouth, little sunglasses on.  
I’m kissed by her subtlety.

### **Elderly Couple in a Mexican Restaurant**

They're sitting in a booth and they haven't said a word  
 except to the waiter. Haven't touched their chips. Or their salsa.  
 The wife fidgets with her purse straps beneath the table.  
 I think she's listening to the people in the adjacent booth.  
 They're drinking Margaritas. Carrying on. In that booth.

The husband studies the sombrero hanging above him on the wall.  
 Studies it intensely. Like he owns it.  
 Like it was his until about a month ago  
 during a polite afternoon barbecue  
 when his wife's girlfriend's  
 asshole husband  
 wore it with the humor he intended to give it  
 but forgot to take it off when he left,  
 leaving the old man's bare scalp to blister in the sun.

I want to go over and take the damn sombrero down  
 and put it on his wife's head. I want her to put it on his head.

Please say something. This is fantastic Mexican. Remember?  
 How 'bout that salsa? The mariachi band? Your new wristwatch?  
 Or, how you've recently and completely lost your taste for oats?  
 I mean, every morning for 45 years! And now?  
 What about her hair? Nice, right? And that broach!  
 Remind her how you saw it that day on the subway.  
 How badly you wanted to buy it from the young woman wearing it  
 who told you "Here. Take it. I'm in love."

Try the salsa. It's good here. The kids at that table over there, they love it.  
 It's all over their clothes. Look. You can understand  
 from when yours were that young. Where are they  
 and why haven't they called?

Listen. Let's trade places.  
 I'll sit in your booth. Eat your salsa.  
 I'll smile knowingly at the messy children's parents.  
 Then I'll point the matter out to your wife, who will  
 appreciate the gesture. And laugh. I'll be you.  
 And, fine. I'll wear the damn sombrero. Padre.

## Some Days

Some days more than others I'm willing to put my two-cents in, say what I'm thinking if I'm thinking without hesitation. Like when I'm paying for groceries or paying for something else. Or looking for an answer. Anywhere people wait in line and I'm one of those people and there's a person in charge. Maybe I'm talking about the clerk, obscenely jovial, whose employee manual possibly includes "chat with the customer" or something eager like that. When I'm in those lines I'm often convinced these clerks really mean it, and the customers too. Good for them. Really. Because some days I could mean it. But others I don't and therefore stay silent. Even if, for instance, there's a girl in front of me at the hardware store buying furnace filters, wood glue, a keychain flashlight she noticed, as I did, in that jar near the cash register, and she's pretty in a smart way, you know, a subtle way that's maddening, and she asks a non-hardware question like directions to a restaurant or if it's any good. And the clerk's desperate to help, but he's foreign and lacks a native's answer. But I in my aloofness could be sitting on a good one, a two to eight-word answer that says it all about that restaurant, an answer she'd appreciate for its concision, the same one I wouldn't give that could persuade her to remember me for later. Am I the kind of contemplative man I never cared for as a boy? I was a contemplative boy, but didn't know it then. But now I meet a clerk at the gas station who rings up my wine, my cigarettes, my scratch-offs, and he's got a friend behind the counter with him who clearly doesn't work here. A girl. Appealing. Looks natural and appealing doing what she's doing. Which is reading the clerk's poem, one that he wrote, in front of him while he says things interruptive like: *I tried something there, but I don't know if it works.* And I'm having the kind of day . . . I'm feeling words are inadequate but here's a guy with a friend who reads his poems in a gas station! Something false inside me wants to spill out and I suddenly feel the need to express something definitive, but instead it's: *So you like that crap, do you?* And the girl continues reading as though my comment couldn't matter but the clerk's a tactful bastard. Tells me it's okay. Tells me I'd have to write them to "truly understand." Tells me he has intelligent friends "who just don't get it either." I nod and grab my things, walk out like I want to walk back in and say something. But what is there to say?

## Poem About Love

I've always wanted to write a poem about love.  
 I've been in love with many women, sometimes several  
 each day, and I love things  
 like movies and fishing and fucking and whiskey  
 and steaks and Ray Carver  
 and I often ride my bike through the streets in love  
 and eat steaks sometimes

but I've never written a poem primarily about love.

The best love poem I've read is called "The Art of Love,"  
 by Kenneth Koch. It's a treatise on love,  
 and in some places it reads very much like an essay.

In it Koch gives perhaps the smartest, most hopeful advice  
 one could give to a man who loves women easily  
 (loving women easily, as Stephen Dunn points out  
 in "The Routine Things Around the House," is a result of  
 having a mother who loves you enough to show you her breasts):

*To win the love of women one should first discover  
 What sort of thing is likely to move them, what feelings  
 They are most delighted with their lives to have,  
 then  
 One should find these things and cause these feelings.*

That's brilliant and useful but I'm thinking now mainly  
 of Viktor Shklovsky, who could've used that advice.  
 I love his name and his story of love is classic.

Unimportantly, I'd argue, Shklovsky was known  
 as a leader of the Russian Formalist movement.  
 He wrote *A Sentimental Journey* and he felt strongly  
 that form should be valued over content.

"Poetry appeared before content," he once wrote,  
 but that's unimportant and wrong in some ways.

More importantly, I'd argue, is the likelihood  
 he kissed his dog if he had one  
 and also the trees and maybe the roads in Berlin too  
 because he was madly in love with Elsa Triolet,  
 whom he met in Berlin, both of them exiled there from Russia  
 following the first world war.

Elsa Triolet. Her name is enough to fall in love with  
 but Shklovsky—his name is hard to type and say  
 and fun to say—he loved Elsa for more than her name  
 and he sent her several love letters each day  
 until she forbade him to write any more letters unless they were  
       not about love.

This would be hard to accept but imagine the possibilities!  
 Shklovsky imagined  
 and he wrote with a will that makes me feel trivial.

Shklovsky loved someone other than himself so much  
 he devoted his talent to it, which is a kind of self-love,  
 and madly he made himself not write about love.

What else could he do? What other Elsa could he love?

Shklovsky wrote an epistolary novel born of these letters  
 which were not about love. He called it

*Zoo, or Letters Not About Love.*

He called Elsa “Alya.”

How can we not think of Yeats at 23  
 and how he loved Maud Gonne madly  
 and how she didn’t love him  
 even though he tried very hard to make her.

He, too, wished to write to her of love and this is what he did.  
 His situation is similar to Shklovsky’s  
 but the difference is  
 Shklovsky’s Shklovsky  
 and he loved Elsa and another difference is  
 Maud Gonne never asked for Yeats to no longer  
 write about love.

Sometimes it’s hard and even impossible  
 to make someone love you. Yeats must’ve known this.  
 A word of advice, or rather something to think about  
 when you’re in love but not loved in return is this:

One reason your love goes unrequited might be  
 that the person you love might not love themselves enough  
 and therefore may wonder why you love them  
 and what’s wrong with you. Or, she may love herself  
       too much.

Or she could be incapable of love, though this isn't likely.  
Or, as Woody Allen suggested in *Annie Hall*, she could be  
reluctant to belong to any club that would have her as a member.

Or maybe she just wants to remain free, as Elsa did,  
which is understandable, but once you've been loved  
and had consistently great dinners  
and uneventful mornings and vicious arguments  
and makeup sex vwith a person you love  
you're likely to look for another companion if your current love fails.

You're likely to believe you can create a great love in her, for you,  
whomever she may be. If only she knew!

I wonder what Shklovsky wanted to do with Elsa. What was it?  
What was it that would have satisfied his hunger for her?

For me, when I'm in love, I often agonize  
and think the most I can do is to take what I have,  
meaning my penis  
and put it deeply up inside,  
maybe from behind,  
and tell my lover with heavy breath on her face

"I love you. This is it! This is all there is!"

But even that isn't enough. One could go crazy!

Kenneth Koch suggests wrapping tape  
around the "arms, waist, ankles, and knees" of one's lover  
and nailing these things to the wall, then  
throwing things at her, things like "small rakes, postal scales,  
aluminum belt buckles, venetian glass clowns."

If you hurt her, Koch says, you should then stop

*And kiss her bruises, make much of them, draw a circle  
around each hit  
With a bold felt pen. In this way you can try to hit the  
same spots over and over again.*

This is what I was getting at earlier when I spoke about  
what my penis might get to do and what I'd say with heavy breath.

*So you and she lie tumbled there together  
Bruises on her body, plaster on your shoulder, she  
bloody, she hysterical, but joy in both your hearts.*

Exactly! But Shklovsky wrote eloquent letters ecstatically that were not about love. Instead they were about other things, observations on German and Russian politics, theories of art and literature.

But do you suppose Shklovsky's love wasn't deeply encoded in these letters not about love? You'd be wrong. In response to the following, an excerpt from the letter "Alya" wrote making her deadly and deadly serious request of Shklovsky—

*My dear, my own. Don't write to me about love. Don't. I'm very tired. As you yourself have said, I have come to the end of my tether. This daily grind pulls us apart. I do not love you and I will not love you. I fear your love; someday you will hurt me because of the way you love me now.*

—the Shklovsky of the novel writes:

*I'm not going to write about love. I'm going to write only about the weather.*

See what I mean? And yet, how far away Shklovsky was from circling bruises with a bold felt pen! And yet, I wouldn't doubt this type of fantasy circled his mind. He'd have drunk bath water happily! Here is the letter which prompted Elsa's request for Shklovsky to stop writing to her about love:

*I haven't seen you for two days  
I call. The telephone squeals; I can tell that I've stepped  
on someone.  
I finally reach you. You're busy in the afternoon, in the  
evening.  
So I write another letter. I love you very much.  
You are the city I live in; you are the name of the month  
and the day.  
I float, salty and heavy with tears, barely keeping my head  
above water.  
I seem to be sinking, but even there, underwater—where  
the phone doesn't ring and rumor don't reach, where it's  
impossible to meet you—I will go on loving you.  
I love you, Alya, yet you force me to hang onto the  
running board of your life.  
My hands are freezing.  
I'm not jealous of people: I'm jealous of your time. It is  
impossible not to see you. So what can I do when there's no*



*substitute for love?*

*You know nothing about the weight of things. All men stand equal before you as before the Lord. So what can I possibly do? I love you very much.*

*At first, I was drawn to you as sleep draws the head of a train passenger toward his neighbor's shoulder.*

*Then I was mesmerized by you.*

*I know your mouth, your lips.*

*I have wound my whole life around the thought of you.*

*I cannot believe that we have nothing in common; well, then—look in my direction.*

*I frightened you with my love; at the beginning, when I was still cheerful, you liked me better. That comes from Russia, my dear. We walk with a heavy tread. But in Russia I was strong; here I have begun to weep.*

Notice how Shklovsky broke those paragraphs, as though every word was the truth!