

# THE BELOIT POETRY JOURNAL

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*Cover Design:* VERNON SHAFFER

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## OLDENBURG'S DUAL HAMBURGERS

1.

They squat on the floor and ooze,  
Sagging under the mayonnaise and the relish,  
The tomatoes, the lettuce, and the sad ketchup:  
The mournful burgers, bursting their double buns.  
Fools! They look like gorilla space pilots.  
If I received such hamburgers over the counter,  
I would fling them in the chef's face.  
If I were they, I would be baleful too.

2.

*Vroom!*

Dual hamburgers are ready to blast off for  
Intergalactic Space.

Rest Areas along the Milky Way! Garbage Pails!  
The West is won! The burgers are in orbit!

! !

Dual hamburgers look as though they could  
die of boredom.

## 3.

The first burger caught fire and plummeted  
to earth over Passaic.

It was the end of a dream.

Already the posters had appeared:



Go Shuttleburger between  
Geneseo and Altoona.



A farmer went mad when he saw it in the  
troposphere.

And then before the eyes of a horrified nation  
The first passengers were charcoal-broiled  
between the non-flammable buns.

A Bermuda onion sailed out of heaven like a  
discus.

The merchants of Passaic, the warehouses and  
public statues,

Sank in the sizzling mustard.

## 4.

Is it friends they want?

Is it children, who would know how to play  
with them?

I would like to take them with me.

I would like to go off into the world with dual  
hamburgers and have adventures.

I would teach them languages and ancient history.

I would teach them to run and sing and take  
them to the Sheep Meadow and turn them  
loose.

I would have them learn the tricks of the trade,  
paint the town red, go into business for  
themselves, grow old gracefully, eat an  
apple a day, take the bull by the horns, know

their ass from their elbow, take a chip off  
the old block, do it up brown, rise to the top  
of the heap, live free or die, do or die, never  
say die, love it or leave it, never give a  
sucker an even break, and marry a nice girl.  
I would teach them to love me.

5.

Are dual hamburgers conscious beings?  
Some have noted in them a strange arrogance.  
And some have found that in certain lights their  
glumness assumes the character of tragic  
knowledge.  
Others have been enraged by the way they sit  
there smugly  
As if they were the turds of God.  
Among the museum-goers several parties have  
crystallized.  
Some would have them burned at the stake.  
Others would make them wear pants.  
Some would build a forbidden ark around them;  
others, a laboratory.  
Still others would stick a pin in them and show  
up the whole hoax.  
As for me, I have spent hours studying them,  
Seeking some spark of mind, some moral quality.  
My feeling is stronger than ever that man was  
not meant to solve  
The secret of the burgers.

6.

I imagine a city of good burgers.  
The buses and subways choked with burgers.  
Studious burgers in the public library.

Frivolous burgers in the singles bars.  
Angry burgers marching to City Hall.  
60,000 burgers at a ballgame.  
Stout burgers, lean burgers, burgers in bowlers  
and Bermuda shorts.  
Brouhaha! Billions of burgers, basted with  
butter and blood, bustling in their buns.

7.

Atlas-like under their glop,  
Dual hamburgers sigh and tolerate my chin-  
stroking.  
So many have rushed by this corner, man,  
woman, and child,  
A woozy dance, a blur of particles, entrance to  
exit, night to night,  
But the hamburgers,  
too heavy to get off their  
asses,  
Sit there forever.

**Thomas Frosch**

## HALLUCINATION

It's one of those tricky afternoons with middle age. Nothing hurts—except the cramp in the foot on the gas which I've had for years, after keeping it paralyzed for hours at the same angle. But as all you agelings know nothing is quite right either—except the car. The car is right and steady. The landscape is steady too, the way tedium is. Both car and landscape survive by singsong repetitions—mechanisms, not like us who have a sense of positive *ill*-being.

You're supposed to laugh, or at least smile. This is the funny part to prepare for the grand conclusion about art and mutability and all sorts of banal themes considered anew, a metamorphosis, one of those tricks that poets do well and thus transcend the raw stuff, like this experience my body played on me as a joke which I exaggerate and tell you as a lie. So please: relax and smile.

It's about three, my metabolic ebb. Station W something or other in a small north Indiana city pours the week's most teen-age hits into the oblivion of my wrinkled ear. Isolation from mankind congeals around me so that one syllable would be crazy talking to myself,

and I'm afraid of going crazy,  
so I sink into my hurried hulk  
hurled eastward through these prosperous farms  
near Angola which might as well be  
Topeka or anywhere along  
an interstate anywhere the same,  
through tune after unimportant tune —  
the driver anywhere the same who  
feels no speed, no weight, only my cramped  
foot fixed on the accelerator.

Then we begin—a first communique  
from my skipping heart, which skips and calls  
for my concentrated thought, which is  
“Oh my, it's going to turn off again.”  
Vision narrows. My focus goes out,  
in, out, while my ears . . . All I can hear  
is the heartbeat spacing itself out  
and feel is blood pressure in decline  
and slow vertigo. I do those chin-  
in-the-air swallows like you do in  
elevators, but my ears won't clear.  
A hot flash spreads from my chest. Panic.  
In my mouth I taste terrible metal.  
I fail. I faint. I smell the boggy.  
My hands clamp on the wheel and turn numb  
and I am dying, Indiana.  
A last twitch flutters in my tricep.  
Why? And disappears. The whole world does.

A voice, in mid-clause somehow, tells me  
“ . . . number three out of four in a row . . . ”—  
that Top-Forty hustler hustling on  
while I revive from my void and that twitch  
resumes and occupies and shakes my hulk  
and me as both surface in daylight.

My heart starts up, and in my fingers  
I find a cigarette half smoked down  
that I never lit because my rule  
on superhighways (boring detail  
that it is, but proof) is a cigarette  
only every sixty miles or more.  
That proof makes evil-smelling oil ooze  
from every pore. The trance is scared away.  
I turn the next brainless hypnotic  
teen-age hit off, act my age, and spend  
what's left of this tricky afternoon  
trying to figure out how I'll live  
underneath this large faint-hearted sky.

Still: at forty-three I am alive  
and adrenalized. I switch back on,  
search up and down the dial, up and down  
for something to reward this keen taste  
that I've been maturing all these years,  
and threadbare Tschaikowsky comes static-  
clogged but better than juvenilia  
or than silence—all these busy men.

As they play, I notice that my foot,  
because I'm still in shock, aches no more.  
The foot pays no attention to fear.  
The foot forgets pain, friends, and we now  
can begin the transcendental half,  
instructive and glorious. They play.

I correct the tuning but in that  
hairline blur the sleeping beauty wakes  
and disappears. "Come back, come back here"  
implores my haunted ear. When I find  
where she was, a male voice explains that  
we'll continue, that that was the Phil-  
adelphia, we will continue with the



Philadelphia, it's Ormandy,  
and Saratoga Springs last August  
while I listen and cross the frontier  
(Farewell, o twanging Indiana!  
and congratulations, Buckeye State,  
for having brought in this Higher Voice  
with whose every seaboard syllable  
my car, flesh, and blood accelerate)  
—and that furthermore this afternoon  
it's Tschaikowsky all the way, an all-  
Tschaikowsky program with next the Fifth  
Symphony. And my proud taste inquires  
“Why does Eugene Ormandy at *his*  
age play this stuff?” but my snobbery—  
decades of *not* listening to his work—  
my snobbery threatens to dissolve  
even as the crude semblance of those  
first famous bars arrives through my four-  
inch speaker. Hearing in this car is  
to music as a picture postcard  
is to standing in a place you loved.  
Nevertheless, I am astonished  
to supply each incident before  
it happens in the orchestra and  
in detail I supposed that I'd cast out  
at twenty-one, at which age I had  
nourished on this man's music for years  
but then, at that age and ever since,  
I decided I'd outgrown his views  
that are adolescent as my heart  
was when it discovered and loved them.

Now, at this time (last August and now:  
early spring) in this place (that upstate  
music shed and here, now: I90  
in Ohio) Eugene Ormandy

is playing for me an old maestro's  
sage rendering of the commonplace  
with two dozen incoherencies  
so built in even he can't hide them  
and enough rubatos to make you blush  
and certitudes. They overcome me  
in the pure, old-fashioned way they feel,  
though crudely heard, and lift up my heart,  
my changeable and forgetful heart  
that dances on ahead of the worn-  
out tunes and has become the hero  
once again of ideas peculiar  
to Romantic Man. My car lifts up  
to an illegal seventy-five.

I take off my hat to orchestras,  
to Europe, to Peter and, o yes,  
to my boyish self who's waked me up.  
He lives. His name is Peter and not  
far from Toledo, Ohio, he  
stays at a patron's country estate  
on the road to Moscow and all day  
senses musical equivalents  
for "doubts, complaints, reproaches," shilly-  
shallies, jubilations in the midst  
of life, that makes no sense otherwise.  
The boy is weeping. He hems. He haws.  
He struggles free, He glides. He is truth.  
He assails. He loves transcendently.  
He is a golden militant who  
does his good and hums. He saves. He's me  
and thanks you, Eugene Ormandy, for  
making clear why thousands in earnest  
paid you to resurrect their young hearts  
last August in a nighttime that smelled  
of far-off stables, lawns and huge trees,

mineral springs, 1888  
when the first audience heard these tunes  
and each of the thousands of springtimes  
fresh tonight in the nostrils of each heart  
which grew up but, to its great relief,  
didn't change except in size and has  
never been other than the same heart  
after all, with these fond lineaments.

Hi, Peter L.B. Tschaikowsky Noll  
sitting beside me in the gilded  
concert rooms of Mother Russia and  
inventing today these dances of  
the late 19th-Century heart and I'm  
in ecstasy again for the first time  
driving across the steppes of Mother  
Ohio whose space lifts me like a hawk.  
I am falling in love with my job,  
with my crazy middle age, justice,  
virtue, the idea of landscape, with  
Mnemosyne mother of all the  
muses who overthrows time and loves  
me back, and more certainly than ever  
with my lover, who loves me back,  
and with the trumpets sounding in my  
immortal blood. I have forgotten  
that I died twice an hour ago,  
for all good things gloriously are  
as they were and for the moment I'm  
free to be innocent forever.

**Bink Noll**

**TWO POEMS****Poem To Comfort My Sister**

1.

May wind  
sets the edges of Chicago  
fluttering, almost as if the city would lift  
off the map and skitter  
weightlessly, its zip codes tumbling  
through metaphorical lottery drums.  
May sun, May foam,  
May high-tide lines  
inched up the beach  
in intersecting parabolas.  
Gulls' beaks shear out  
a perfect circle of air,  
let it drop, stitch it back.  
And I'm  
eye-level with kiwis, feeling the world  
smacked damp against my belly  
catch the breeze  
in a tremor that's what ruffling  
is to a silk babushka.  
This is the day  
Chicago could snap its plumbing  
and levitate,  
tousled, transparent, if not for the hospitals,

\*

funeral parlors, jailhouse backrooms  
splattered with trachea-blood and spit,  
marine recruiting centers, padlocked  
orphanages with eyes inside window-glass  
emblematic of burnt-out bulbs, insane

asylums, TB sanitariums shaking  
 a leaf in a cough, a tree of coughs, and every  
 darkened doorjamb waterlogged  
 with a wino's pea-colored phlegm  
 or hooker's nightly volume of ten-buck come

\*

weighting down the city's corners.  
 Each rust-speck has its gravity.  
 And even then,  
 no babushka, a scrap of butcher-paper  
 perhaps, Chicago could shake itself  
 free for a moment and waft  
 up a manhole's steam

\*

if I wasn't bent, pressed recklessly down  
 on all glass-lacerated fours,  
 the dirt beneath my fingernails  
 the heaviest thing in Illinois.

## 2.

This morning, a dream of our father  
 bloated, like pigskin, under the reaming-knife.  
 This evening, the trance, the stare-at-the-wall,  
 feeling each bit of dust  
 hit my shoulder, mote on mote  
 until it accretes  
 in its original shape as a bird  
 on a wire.  
 Every hour clicked off with the sound  
 of a respirator's surrender.  
 And

\*

in the middle of today's whole fracas  
 I stopped at Juneway Beach to inhale  
 as much of the long wave-lapped horizon  
 as my chest could hold. I write this

to you knowing someday you'll ask me something  
of getting through life, why it must be inch  
by inch; and then I'll ask you to remember  
this, how on an easier day, without a thought  
of divorce court or caskets  
clotting my mind, I kneeled in sand  
as if to print a focal point  
for the turning gulls; and, feeling the salt  
brined up behind my eyes  
in osmotic stability  
with the salt air, I stared  
down the undulating stretch of whatever  
there is to breathe along the curve where water  
    slaps sky,  
and took my first  
really cognizant lungfull,  
and hoisted myself through this life  
on a frayed rope of air,  
a blue rope, unit by unit,

\*

and each blue unit the length of my nostril,  
and reeled the world's rim in.  
This is the epoch of little miracles.  
And if the traffic is punctuated with ambulances  
and hearses splattering all day  
like the death of a genus of insects  
against our windshields, still  
we musn't overlook to be wide-eyed and thankful

\*

our retinas work at all.

### 3.

Ernest Vincent Wright lifts his pen  
from the last wet word of the last strange page  
of *Gadsby*, and sighs  
through a smile. The word dries.

The year is 1939,  
and he's just finished a novel  
of over 50,000 words—not one  
(and now the smile shapes  
around the deep o's and a's  
of a belly laugh) damn word containing  
the letter e.

\*

Now sound of bamboo on palm  
poks through the forest. A Tasaday  
swings his L-shaped bamboo mallet high  
overhead, and poises  
a glistening split-second  
under the Philippines sun, then arcs  
down hard, and smashes  
the tasty *natok* starch from split palm.  
Blows land daylong  
less than a quarter-inch from his feet,  
this being the way  
his father taught him; that night  
he squats in his cave niche,  
removes the orchid-leaf loincloth  
and gives his body over  
to the wind's caress, his ten toes wiggling  
a dance on their side  
of the line between accuracy and crippling,  
his tongue  
revelling in a ball of cooked *natok*,  
a small joy, a little precision.

\*

And Brooks  
drops asleep under sodium pentathol,  
dreaming his guts  
carved out, his rectum sewed  
irreversibly shut, his body's stinks

collecting overnight from now on  
in a plastic bag;  
and wakes  
colostomized in the bed  
beside our father's,  
to find himself again  
not dead.

\*

This is the epoch of little miracles,  
Livia, take what you can get.  
Gull, does your beak snip?

—I surgery air.

Will it hurt?

—The waves are anesthetists.

Sandpiper, sandpiper, drill me deep.

—Fish-mouths are holes, but the lake goes on  
living.

Livia, don't be afraid.

Each time we feel the pain spade under our  
hackles,

*something's* working right.

4.

Listen:

Livia, don't be afraid.

One night, maybe, you'll wake to the cold  
shoot of air across your shoulders  
though the windows are locked. And then you  
musn't

wring your sweat from the blanket-fringe  
in fear, or think a touch like that anything  
but my caress. It could be

\*

one day you'll be walking the beach,  
smiling, sneakered, hair amazed  
in the wind, when you'll suddenly see yourself



against the blue  
as if from a gull's perspective, and realize  
how thin the cohesion  
that keeps the atoms of your hand  
from lifting into the air.  
And you'll know lakewater  
for what it is, a touch, maybe my touch  
organized less tight;  
you musn't tremble at this.  
Or maybe  
you'll thrust your arm in the air  
and feel one atom  
deep in your palm hum clearly  
in affinity, and rise like carbonation  
through your lifeline's crease, and free itself  
into atmospherics;  
and you'll walk on, aware, an isotope  
of who you were  
last minute. On a day like that  
the edges of this smudgy city itself  
could be so tenuous, lose themselves in brume,  
metamorphose. Do you doubt  
I'll be there to comfort you?  
Listen:  
even now the water's aerating  
foam around sandpiper legs.  
Slowly lift your fingers and scent  
\*  
the gas you could be,  
the light perfume.

**Forever****1.**

He woke to the realization of his body  
trying to balance its heart  
between the kiss  
still puddled on his lips like a gloss  
and the nail-rakings scraped down his back.  
Such touch could smolder  
holes in the floor-planks.  
Her empty dent on the bed was still warm,  
and he spread his palm on the linen  
where he judged her left breast had burrowed  
against the cold, and beat til morning.  
He thought of that: the sheets  
used to be redolent with her drippings.  
The night they flipped through the album  
his heart thumped  
inexplicably at the photo of her nosegay  
caught, a round red blur  
fixed chemically on square paper,  
no longer  
something to wallow the face in,  
nostrils flitting like bees  
from bloom to bloom, black wings  
humming up the forehead.

\*

In the knife-blade she was thin,  
all neck, all ridge. In the creamer  
she bulged, a dollop of pink on its silver surface.  
She paced  
in the zoo of these aluminum cages, no handle,  
no dish ever empty of her,  
no setting of service ever reflecting more

than an extreme she could warp to.  
Sometimes, before he woke  
and lumbered in, she'd stare at her fingernail  
for minutes—today an hour passed—  
to see her smudge of face reflected on something  
warm once, with blood behind it.  
The day the morning went in circles  
she sat doing nothing in the love-seat  
but turn the ring on that finger  
around her knuckle, over  
and over again, as if it were a control  
to tune the waiting face in  
clearer.

## 2.

*We've all come to a country house  
so old, the doilies seemed spider's work,  
the air kept cross-country-long  
in our suitcases whooshed  
from out of our sleeves and trumpeting pants legs  
like a wind along the sills,  
and the teeth in the glass  
on the upstairs bureau  
seemed wet with a deeper water,  
a well-water  
bucketed up from substrata.  
Here, one could find the encyclopedia  
turning bituminous under its dust,  
choose a volume,  
and flip through the stiffened necrographies  
to the boutonniere,  
brittled, dreaming a buttonhole,  
pressed between the yellow pages  
so flat,  
it's another entry.*

## 3.

The pines fenced in the family home.  
The honeymoon night, he'd carried her  
through an aisle of pine, up the wood steps  
and under the bedroom lintel.  
A moment only, kissing her  
fiercely between the knotted jambs,  
they seemed a wood engraving  
emblematic of Marriage,  
and then broke out of that pose  
to the hand-hewn bed, its mattress green  
as beginnings, and made pine creak all night.

\*

Morning: the trees still there. They stood  
by her birthday, by Christmas, and every  
anniversary  
rooted further in. On bad nights he dreamt  
of his parents below them, his children  
stretched in the bedrooms above,  
and he and his wife rayed laterally out  
from a monstrous vertical pith  
whose only gods were the seasons.  
That was the dream;

\*

and waking, some mornings, he thought of the  
house  
boxed in  
like a portrait, its white cheeks rouged,  
in a fir-wood frame  
on a wall  
set in timber.

## 4.

Leg bent  
by a sudden log on the path,  
the boy fell face-up,

his twisted bone  
the locus of all consciousness  
in an evergreen forest.  
Green needles  
stitched his eyes up, the pain  
was that intense  
and at one with the landscape.  
The sharp, glint-green coniferous tips  
speared through the loam like arrows,  
he could feel one barb prick his leg,  
at the ankle, a sawing, a felled tree  
revenging itself.

\*

That, of course, was long ago,  
decades. And such a memory seemed out of place  
at the family Christmas reunion.  
Only  
passing the tree, on his way to the kitchen,  
he thought again  
of those perfect trunks: stately, eternal,  
painless thrusts to the sky;  
and he'd been proud of his aching.  
He saw, once more, his hobbling home,  
his crazied cripple's maze of a path  
limped and hopped  
through the resinous evening,  
wobbled and danced  
over tripping roots. That was the summer  
his voice cracked too,  
then deepened. When the leg healed, he knew:  
even limping,  
even broke beyond use,  
to be malleable  
in a superstructure of straight limbs  
is a freedom.

## 5.

It was snowing; the firs were glazed  
 and perfect, the house almost perfectly  
 iced in. She came in the kitchen door,  
 gloves off, her nails frosted,  
 her fingers slow and dull with the winter.  
 He saw her, from where he watched, boil water  
 and wash her hands in its steam, and stare  
 at her face in the kettle until it shrilled.  
 And even then, the whistle a pain, her hands  
       continued  
 wrestling each other:

  the five fingers  
 she blew kisses with, combatting the hand  
 whose reflected faces  
 seemed gnawing out, fanged,  
 from behind slats.

## 6.

*Such stillness laps in black whisks  
 at the porchstoops of a small-town night,  
 these white-board houses seem the tenth  
 of iceberg we've seen in science texts.  
 The sleeping bodies are long, silver  
 flashlights, brains frozen  
 shining forever; and the dream of one's the  
       bouquet  
 hung lit forever  
 above the dark bottom tenths  
 where the bride's fling's still poised,  
 half caress, half a clawing.*

**Albert Goldbarth**

**AS IMPERCEPTIBLY AS GRIEF:  
ANNOTATIONS TO A LIFE OF DICKINSON**

We were never intimate Mother  
and Children while she was our  
mother—but Mines in the same  
ground meet by tunneling and  
when she became our Child, the  
Affection came.

Not what the stars have done,  
but what they are to do, is what  
detains the sky.

— from the letters

**I** *scattered observations, spring, 1883*

On hills farther than you can reach  
    night hammers  
the last dark wedges of light  
    into the earth.

You remember your mother's face loosening,  
    its fossil lines less rigid.  
She is beginning to tell you  
the real names for things—  
    sweet gale,  
    fox-grape,  
    cinammon fern.

The words crust at the side of your mouth.  
Beyond, the flowers of the swamp rose  
    clot on their stems.

You do not notice the water shrew  
scurrying over duckweed,  
the small flames of the fox's whisper.

Over your head  
the parched branches of an oak  
have cut through darkness  
like abandoned mine shafts.

You begin to remember  
how the mayflies flake wildly onto  
the lighted windows of the house.  
In a few hours they die and  
the pond distills that death.

Now, marshgrass defines the wind.

Your cocoon tightens.  
Starlight burrows into a stand of trees.

Between two clots of grass  
the feathers of a dead sparrow grow  
as stiff as the dry  
kernels of a pine cone.

To the right, where last Fall  
the underbrush was set afire,  
antlers of brush  
knock against the dark.

A hound examines  
the spongy lungs of a dead rabbit.  
In their bright barbed eyes  
you can count the narrow deaths.

You think: what tracks follow  
the long intestine of this fire's light?

Listen: your coiled ear  
wraps around the smallest sound.

Adder's tongue,  
liver leaf,  
blood root,



a dream begins to sprout in the  
charred light of these words.

## II *perishings*

Your breasts are filling like milkweed,  
    you are tired now  
    walking your twelve years  
down the path lined by maple,  
    the new leaves  
just sprung from the branches,  
    the path cramped with  
    a thousand insects  
    questioning your neck and face:  
there is some unnamed desire which  
    walks behind you  
    like an empty pair of shoes,  
and you would know it as you know  
    the new rocks that have risen  
    from the fields after mowing  
    like bald heads or knuckles,  
    the dream which clings to you,  
    this brown burr  
    which sticks to your dress in passing,  
    this bending back  
    toward earth  
as the long grass does after rain.

Now, each stone becomes a wish.

    You hear the whirr of a bat  
as the black fist of his body opens,  
the green salamander sifting through grass.  
Sunset: planks of light splinter,  
    shatter to distant fragments.  
Once again, it is death the small  
    hinge of a sparrow's wing.

Here, the early fireflies hurry  
over the stalks of wild celery.

    You lean back  
    against your own darkness  
naming fox-tail, bur-reed,  
    watching the red squirrel  
curl like a burning leaf on the wind,  
    the moth preen itself for  
    a moment you only imagine.  
Your firelight falls as heavy as rain.  
Small bruises of light stick to the trees.  
    Near the pond's edge you  
    can hear the water bubbles  
breaking in an otter's wake like eggs,  
    the racoon hunching slowly  
along the swollen rim of a hill,  
stumbling through the reddening ground fog,  
    the low, smudged light,  
    the dark distilled in roots,  
    this quiet ovulation of the sun.

### III *beginnings*

    The days turn topaz like  
    a lady's pin.  
It is morning again,  
    the ticking bells,  
the frogs prattling in ponds,  
    the pods of flame  
opening in the far woods,  
this light a sudden musket spills.  
All week the caddisflies have risen from  
their tight streams, preparing to die.  
A wind interrogates the daisies.  
    And so, you begin now with

the usual lists of clay—  
    indian pipe,  
    cowbird,  
    cattail,  
each name its own disguise.

Above, the bony scream  
of a hawk holds off the sky.  
Behind you, the bats still  
shift in a mob of trees.  
They have gathered scraps of the wind, and now,  
    complicate the shapes of branches  
    with their small wads of darkness.  
It is your own dream which fumbles there.  
    You want to say again—  
*I am out with lanterns, looking for myself.*  
    You watch as the hawk soars,  
    slides down near the sky,  
see beyond the edges of those wings  
    the corridors of light.

Light wrinkles on your hands.  
This morning the seams of an empty field  
collect loose dust.  
The tips of hemlocks open like blinds.  
A cat sips from a wheel's rut these  
distances he cannot forget.  
    Here, you cannot remember  
    the real names for things.  
The tiny midges are aimless as ever,  
    and now an otter,  
the dew glistening on his fur like sweat,  
slips as this poem does  
into a dark tunnel of  
the words we thought we owned.

**Richard Jackson**

## TWO POEMS

## Grit

"Think of someone worse off 'n yourself,"  
snaps my mother.

I droop on the couch.

"And wipe that look off your face!"

What look? I try to go blank.

Brandishing a mop,  
she thrusts her face into the doorway.  
She looks like the puppet, Punch.  
"If there's anything I can't stand,  
it's a *baby*."

She retreats to the kitchen.  
Wham! goes the pail.  
Splat! goes the mop.  
The theme for today:  
*Tenderness is taboo.*

Fumes of ammonia drift towards me like a noose.  
Bang. Whomp. Swat.

Cora, my older sister,  
brushes by the couch.  
Out of the side of her mouth,  
she says, "Think of snowflakes."  
Then she goes out the door, to school.

The Punch-face pokes around the doorway again.  
"I wish you had just *half* of that girl's *grit*,"  
it huffs. "She's been twice as sick as you, for  
three days; threw up from the soles o' her feet;  
cleaned up every mess by herself. Her face is as

yellow as butter, but she goes to school, anyway.”

I wilt.

“You’re thinkin’ of *yourself!*  
Think of someone *else!*”

She pops back into the kitchen.  
More ammonia. Another mother would  
be laying a soft palm on my forehead . . .  
offering pale tea or orange juice.  
I should be glad she doesn’t try to soothe me.  
Her hands are like alligators. (“*When I was  
sixteen, I asked for some lemon hand cream  
for Christmas,  
and my brothers pissed in a bottle  
and give it to me. Ha. I laughed. I can take  
a joke.*”)

Re-enter, Alligator:

“Why, where would I be if I thought  
about myself? In the asylum, that’s where,  
or in the grave. What would you do if you  
had my laxeration floppin’ between yer legs  
all the time, *huh?* That’s what I’ve had to  
put up with ever since givin’ birth to Cora.”

I’ve heard this a hundred times. I picture  
a cubed steak, of moderate size, flapping from  
her crotch. Her big bloomers accommodate it.

Exit, Alligator, to the kitchen.

Sounds of huffing and puffing and of the mop  
bludgeoning the cellar steps.

Somewhere, nuns are saying their beads.

She calls out: “Dr. Tenbrink said:  
‘I don’t see how you stand it, Mrs. VanZandt.  
You could sue the doctor that left you in that  
shape!’”

A chair topples.

"But I don't think about my pains.

I think about Minnie Huyser. She's nearly  
seventy.

Her organs are hanging almost to her *knees*.  
Think of *that!* Someday they'll pull the bladder  
right outa her!"

Splat.

I picture a wad of chicken parts  
on a purplish thong, like a pendulum,  
tolling away Minnie Huyser's days.

Another noose of ammonia.

The toilet gulps down the pail of mop water.

*("You're no good! What'll I do with you?  
Huh?*

*Shall I throw you away? Huh? Aw, wipe  
that look*

*off yer face. It's just a game!")* Memories of  
playful baby-days.

Now the odor of Fels Naptha soap.

My head throbs. My eyes sting. My throat  
feels "laxerated." The washing machine,  
in the cellar below me, growls with its  
hugged prey. The wringer squeals.

Re-enter, Punch.

She thrusts a glass of water at me.

"I spoil ya. Cora got her own, always."

She points to her temple. "See that?"

I see nothing.

"Bumped it on the corner of the cellar door.  
Isn't it red?"

I nod.

"Soon it will be a lump—purple,  
green, blue, I'll forget about it.  
Ha!"

That *look* has come over her face.  
I brace myself: Here it comes:

"I hope you don't turn out like your Aunt Marie  
—layin' there cryin' in that asylum. Hell, a nurse  
oughta slip her a dose of somethin' to give her  
a *real*  
bellyache . . . 'n make her clean up after herself.  
Give her sumpin' real to cry about, huh?"

Snowflakes on Aunt Marie.

"Think of Aunt Ida. Her with a tumor like a  
grapefruit in her side . . . 'n others like a bunch  
o' grapes in her tit. She goes right on workin'.  
Yer cousin Freddie: hemorrhages from his  
nose like  
cranberry sauce. He goes on drivin' that truck."

—her speciality, in technicolor, like a slide  
show.

Uncle Abe: skin disease like raw hamburger  
all over

his neck . . . Aunt Elsie: goiter like a hen's  
egg . . .

Aunt Doris: wad of fur the size of a cantelope  
in her

appendix ("an for years, her mother *told* her  
and *told*

her not to keep kissin' that cat!")

"Think of Uncle Pete's sinus trouble:  
Why, to look in that man's handkerchiefs,  
you'd think he'd blowed out his *brains*."

Snow . . . snow . . .

Sikes told her once of a carnival where  
they saw, among other heroics, a man  
pushing his  
nuts in a wheelbarrow: elephantiasis.  
Snowflakes . . . snowflakes and morning  
glories  
and lilies of the valley . . . cover that  
wheelbarrow.

“And don’t forget Uncle Klaus; the doctor in  
the prison hospital.  
told him drinking is a disease.”  
She taps her forehead. “Is it swelling?”

I nod.

She lunges at the curtains, shakes them:  
testing for dust. Knocks a picture askew  
on the wall. She’s getting hopped-up now.  
This sublimation-stuff exhilarates her.  
“And the doctor said: ‘Why, Mrs. VanZandt,  
if you don’t have that laxeration operated on,  
you’ll not last another five years!’ That was  
when you was born—eleven years ago. And here  
I am,  
cleanin’ the house. You know *why*? Because I  
think  
of OTHERS!”

She snatches the Hoover.  
They whiz around the room together, like a  
dance team.  
“Sadie Morton!” she spurts. “Think of poor  
Sadie Morton!”

Sadie Morton: Dead of cancer last year.  
Snowflakes. A blanket of snow on your grave,  
Poor Sadie Morton.

She’s glowering at me.



Has that babyish look seeped back into my  
face?

“I don’t know what will become of you, Girl.  
Just like yer father. Just like his sister Marie.  
Three sissies.”

I turn my face from her, waiting for five-  
thirty,  
when my father’s mournful glance will  
confirm  
my misery.

She slams the Hoover into the closet.  
Her glance re-evaluates my face.

C minus?

She points a pistol-finger at her calf.  
“What’dya do if *you* had legs like this?”

I make myself look at that bunch of marbles  
in her stocking.

Jabbing that gun-finger: “What’d *you* do, huh?”

Shoot it?

“Speak up. What would *you* do if you had  
these veins?”

Wear slacks? . . . I shake my head, woefully.

A smile twitches at her lips.

I’m up to C plus?

“I don’t give them a thought. I think of others.  
Right now, you know who I’m thinking of?”

I shake my head.

“Hank Plow. Did I ever tell you about Hank  
Plow?”

I nod, but too faintly.

“Hank Plow had his arm tore off in the cutter  
at the  
paper mill. Gangrene set in . . . ”

A blizzard of snow around you and your  
green stump,  
Hank Plow.

“Then Hank’s brother, Ernie, he had this terrible  
accident—”

I lie there, imprinted: her *tabula rasa*.

Those colored slides, which have rendered me  
catatonic,  
have filled her with a helium. Billowing with  
borrowed  
sufferings, she seizes the step ladder.

“I’ve a good mind to wash that ceiling!” she  
sings.

She mounts the rungs: Minnie Sadie Pete  
Halfway up, her red Aryan hands take a swipe  
at the beige lampshade: Marie Dad me  
“My lump’s turnin’ green now isn’t it? Ha!”  
She soars to the ceiling  
and scrubs the stains from her heaven.

## Low

1951

“I hafta count the cars,” she says,  
her hooked finger jabbing the November air.

“Count the cars?” I say. “Why?”

"I *hafta!*" she snaps.  
 Her head pumps to assist the finger.  
 "—14, 15, 16—"

We stand shin-deep in snow,  
 hunching under a renewed squall.  
 Cousins, aunts, uncles, my sister Cora  
 and her husband are scraggling away  
 from my Dad's fresh grave.

"But *why?*" I whisper  
 as I take her elbow to steer her away.

She wrenches herself from me.  
 "Now I lost *count!*"  
 The finger finds the place in front  
 of her face and resumes the poking;  
 the head pumps more earnestly,  
 "—23, 24, 25— Sikes 'n Agnes always  
 count the cars, and if I don't, they'll be mad."

Sikes: her dwarfish oldest brother,  
 pensioned after forty years of janitoring  
 at the state asylum; hence an expert on  
*the mind*. Agnes, her oldest sister,  
 yellowed and soured among doilies and  
 ouija board.

Embarrassed, I stand with her.  
 All the others have left.  
 The soggy flakes are chilling my shoulders,  
 but she is rooted here: the widow, age  
 fifty-nine,  
 turned off, as ever, to her husband, of whom  
 she had said all those years his symptoms  
 were  
 accumulating: "His imagination; he'll outlive  
 me  
 'n marry a young woman with big tits. Agnes  
 says so."

— who babbled, even as he lingered, a mere  
 pelt stitched  
 over his cancer: “Brought it on himself.  
 Brooded.  
 Sikes knows a lotta cases like that.”

The cars jerk away like starlings through the  
 slushy cemetery. I look down at the wet  
 chrysanthemums  
 beside me.

“—34, 35, 36— Oh, I *hope* I got it *right*.”

Sikes stumps towards us: a toad-man made  
 even more  
 top-heavy by hat and cigar: “Hey! Git in  
 the car, *you!*”

She flops along behind him like a hooked fish.  
 “49—no, maybe 50—or 51?” she gulps.

“You crazy?” he snarls. “Agnes got 43.”

Over my shoulder, I say goodbye  
 to the wet chrysanthemums;  
 then fold myself into the flivver  
 with their bickering.  
 Agnes wags ochre jowls, fixes cinder-eyes  
 upon my mother. “Whassa matter with you,  
 Katie?  
 It’s 43.” Within that mound of urine-scented,  
 wine-colored velveteen, I can feel that other  
 statement steaming (“*If you don’t git holda  
 yerself,  
 Katie, Sikes ’n me’ll hafta put you in the  
 asylum.*”)  
 Before it can boil out of her mouth,  
 something fresh  
 from the chrysanthemums leaps from my  
 tongue:

"Take her straight home," it says.  
"She needs a rest."

They retreat like turtles—all three of them.

I should have known:  
No sooner am I alone with my mother  
than she hisses: "Won't you never learn,  
you college girl? You gotta make yerself *low*."

All evening, I watch her lips fumble  
through that old pack of phrases for just  
the right one to present to that pair  
when they drop in to check on her tomorrow.  
I can guess what it will be:  
*"—I brought it on myself: You both warned me  
more'n thirty years ago: That's what I git  
for marrying that GERMAN."*

1933

"Phooey!" she squeals.  
"That's what I think of it: Phooey!"  
She snatches my all-A report card  
from the kitchen table, whips it to her fanny,  
and wipes.

Nellie, my schoolmate, cackles.  
Her card is a bramble of D's.

With spider-fingers my mother approaches  
my long taffy-colored curls. She yanks one loose,  
spits on it. "Buh! 'Beauty's only skin-deep!'"

Nellie, whose hair is the color of mud,  
hoots her on.

I hold my face rigid as a cameo.  
I am ten. For ten years I have been  
rehearsing for these scenes.

Later, after Nellie has left, my mother

will whisper, "I didn't spit hardly at all.  
 I don't want you getting stuck-up.  
 It's bad to git ahead o' yer chums.  
 Something bad always happens to them that use  
 the mind too much. In the biggest wing o' the  
 asylum, they're packed in like cattle: doctors  
 'n perfessors that burned out their minds."  
 Her blue eyes dart. She taps her own tawny head.  
 "Runs in our family: Marks mostly them with  
 light hair."

Fear? Anger? Shame?  
 I feel a minimum.

Evenings, as I sit in the living room  
 across from my dark father and my dark sister;  
 he, silent with his Bible;  
 Cora, silent with her sewing;  
 I, silent with my school book,  
 my mother will push a prodding finger  
 across the 'bituary page of the newspaper.  
 "Sara O'Conner. That could be the Sally O'Conner  
 that was my teacher. Seventy-eight; sure that  
 could  
 be her. Kidneys. All them O'Connors bloat  
 somethin' awful with kidney trouble . . .  
 She had it in fer me 'cuz my mother was dead  
 'n I had lice 'n my brother Pete was in jail  
 'n my brother Dan put turpentine on her cat's  
 hindend.  
 She called me 'Kitty' 'though she knew my name  
 was Katie, just to cheapen me fer the boys  
 'n she'd slap my hands with that ruler 'cuz  
 I was Dutch 'n couldn't talk good 'n couldn't  
 learn  
 'n didn't wear nice dresses like the 'Merican girls.  
 Shit, Miss O'Conner, the meaner you got,  
 the more I prayed fer you . . .  
 Clyde Wagner. Bet he's related to Henry Wagner.

That Henry stoned Sikes right on the head.  
 Sikes was bleedin' somethin' terrible, but he  
 jist called out: 'Henry! Henry! I'm gonna pray  
 fer you!' " She glares at my father, sticks out  
 her tongue. He does not look up from his Bible.  
 "It don't take no spirit just to stick yer nose  
 in the Bible. The real spirit is when you pray  
 through yer own blood fer yer enemy!"  
 She thumbs her nose at my father. He does not  
 move.

Twenty years of rehearsals:

He's a better cameo than I am.

"Maude Moyer. My, my.

Agnes worked in the papermill

with a Maude Moyer, or Moynehan

'r something like that. A real pretty girl:

fair complected, nice teeth, big bust.

Thought herself a little *above* the mill gang,

though . . . so she become a Cathlic nun.

Well . . . she started rammin' them candles

up her you-know-what. She hit a certain nerve

that made her shake all over 'n that affected

the brain 'n she was put in the asylum.

Sikes knows all about those cases."

We sit there, prim and pure

as three mirrors, tripling

the grotesqueries of this

turpented Kitty.

1972

"This peacock-welcome for *that*?"

my husband whispered.

He was shocked that I'd cut our prize

chrysanthemums for this round-shouldered,

twenty-year-old file clerk, picking her acne,

blinking at the carpet with familiar eyes.

It was Cora's daughter, Rena, who had

smuggled  
herself a thousand miles, by bus, for an  
abortion.

"She's a telescope to my own girlhood," I snapped;

then choked back from him that scene:  
My mother's twin brother—rancid, scruffy  
Klaus,  
leering at Cora's budding sweater . . .  
lifting my skirt for a spank . . .  
We flee to the kitchen; stand blinking at  
the floor.  
Mamma smirks. "I s'pose *you'd* act better'n  
that  
if *you'd* been locked in the Coop three years."  
Cora and I exchange a sneer.

"Don't snub him," Mamma warns. "You  
may have

a son worse'n him someday." She dashes  
to the pantry for boiled potatoes.

"Run to the cellar for a jar o' wax beans!"  
she commands. We scurry.

"—and a jar o' mustard pickles! —'n that  
grape jam!"

Last month: this feast for Pete, hiding from  
the game warden. Last summer: soup bowls of  
cottage cheese for Dan, nearly gutted from  
canned heat.

"Don't tell yer oldman!" Mamma hisses.

At the stove a-sputter with salt pork  
and potatoes and coffee and beans and eggs,  
she starts rocking and stomping and blatting  
her lullabye:

*"Oh, the Niggers 'n the Irish  
They don't amount to much—"*

Klaus ambles to the kitchen table.

With spatula and spoon, she makes  
pat-a-cake motions to him.



“—*But still they’re better’n  
the gol-darned Dutch!*”

The paroled face splits like a rotten fruit,  
showing brown stubs, like seeds, in  
mauve mush.

Her face splits, too, into tears.

He was her son long before we were her  
daughters.

Now I found myself whispering to my sleek son  
and daughter:

“Be kind to her, Jonathan . . . She hasn’t had your  
privileges, Jill.”

To thaw their frost, I brought out the sparkling  
burgundy;  
baked round loaves of bread . . . stuffed the  
picnic hamper  
. . . sang old Dutch songs . . . coaxed Rena to  
sing, too.

That night, in bed, my husband scolded:

“She came for an abortion, not an exorcism.”

I sighed. He was not watching through that lens:

My mother, in cahoots with those Skid Row  
brothers,

dreads those *other* males: boys our age:

Americans—

tall, with white teeth and cars.

With her knee, she demonstrates, repeatedly,  
just where to strike them, and *when*.

(She *knows*. Sikes has shown her.)

My husband and our children had to endure  
her

only once, years ago, for twenty minutes.

They’ve

spent as much time watching the orangoutang  
at the zoo.

Cowed Cora drags her brood to Grandma's  
every Sunday.

It was from those twenty years of Sunday sessions  
that I yearned to yank the cord in Rena that  
might

unpucker my own pouch of pain. "How about a  
farewell picnic on the Potomac?" I asked.

My glacier-husband requested a tray in his den.  
Jill and Jonathan exchanged that sneer.

So: Into the gouges scraped by those three exits,  
I poured sesame rolls, cheeses, Cold Duck . . .  
flowers and songs.

. . . On a sunny rock by the Potomac,  
with the white mum in her hand like a kitten,  
listening

. . . Rena loosened. Through her voice, through  
her

grimaces, leaking like pus through her  
gestures . . .

came that oldwoman, now eighty; sole survivor  
of that family of ten.

I saw those ochre jowls, stashed with that  
deeded venom

. . . saw those inverted lips nibbling . . .

heard her muttering:

"My Cora, she knows her place . . .  
but you take that younger daughter—bah!  
Got greedy for college 'n that *high* stuff.  
Married a perffessor: a 'Merican. He writes  
*poims*.

*Suicide*: It's stamped all over his face . . .  
Well, I brought it on myself: Hardly ever  
punished her.

When I did, her Dad upheld her. With Cora,  
I did  
better. It's easier to hit a plain child . . .  
But that second girl, she had me stumped.  
She was so fair 'n dainty 'n she learned so  
easy:  
just a baby when she could say her numbers  
so clear  
'n the letters 'n all the colors. I admit it:  
*I was proud.* Sikes saw it. Agnes saw it.  
They warned me. They tole me to whip the  
piss outa her.  
Just once would do it, they said, twice, at  
most,  
to break that German pride . . . But a  
mother's heart  
is soft. Oh, I hit her" a shrug. "—a coupla  
times  
when I caught her actin' snippy in fronta  
the lookin' glass; I hit her: just a *tap*.  
*Did she cry!* She'd have nothin' to do with me  
after that. Nothin.' Run to her Dad fer  
everything.  
How's that for bullheaded? Two of a kind,  
them.  
I was just dirt under their feet . . . Well,  
never mind.  
Oh, if I had it to do all over again, I'd whip—  
No. You see sometimes in the paper a poor  
mother  
that got started on her kid 'n couldn't stop . . .  
I tell you what: If I had it to do all over again,  
'n They was passin' out them bright little  
towheaded  
baby girls again, I'd just say NO THANKS . . .  
'Course I pray for her. Night 'n day, I pray

for that girl . . . But the mistake's been made:  
I was dumb. I let her put herself above me.  
I s'pose she's still flyin' HIGH . . . And of  
course,  
someone else will have to do what I didn't do:  
Sure, someone will put her down LOW . . .  
just wait 'n see."  
A slow shake of the head. A sigh. "What I'm  
so afraid of  
is that it will be her kids that will do it . . .  
Yeah,  
it will be her kids . . . Just wait 'n see . . ."

Friday, with a yellow mum abloom like a sunrise  
on her shoulder, Rena departed, by plane.

Saturday, our glamorous Jill,  
playing the lead in the school play,  
started to flounder on the stage . . .  
slushed her lines . . . and flopped like a hooked  
fish  
towards her brother in the third row.

She sits now at the hospital window,  
tapping her finger in front of her face,  
pumping her head . . .  
She's counting the cars in the parking lot.

Jonathan tells us: "I guess I gave her  
some bad dope."

My husband has no comment.  
Now he is the cameo.

I cannot sleep.  
My bladder floods.  
My crotch stings.

*Mamma! Call off your prayers!*

**Karen Snow**