

The Rosemary

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Abstract

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A collection of poems.

Table of Contents:

Section 1	Page #
Something of a Sonnet	6
The Rosemary	7
The Time Traveler Explains His Trade	8
Color Leaves the Curtains	9
Letter to Hugo From Nederland, CO	10
Letter to Hugo From Friday Harbor	11
A Simile	12
Mishap	13
When Held to the Window	14
Aubade	15
Section 2	
Justice in the Eaves	17
Three Malapropisms	18
1. Writing	18
2. Trying to Find a Needle on a Racetrack	19
3. Leveraged to the Hills	20
Still Life Analysis	21
Beetle	22
Duwamish	23
A Summer Afternoon	24
George's Corner	25
Walking the Creekside Trail	26
The Cowboy Leaves the Bar	27
Section 3	
Tell Me	29
February 14 th , 2013	30
Cody Firearms Museum	31
The Stainless Steel Teapot	32
Grapefruit	33
Ragtime	34
Assertions	35
The Time Traveler Describes His Vision	36
On Blue	37
Beautifully, I Go	38

SECTION 1

Something of a Sonnet

Tonight I walked to the preschool playground
and sat on a bench under the orange hue
of a streetlight where a leaking standpipe
wet a long stretch of the concrete courtyard
across which snails travelled smooth and slow
like ferries crossing a bay,

and I thought of the apartment we shared,
in the complex by the 7-Eleven,
how I went back one night after you moved
out and saw the vacant parking garage
glowing in the dark like the empty belly
of a ferry, when the captain and crew
moor her fast to the dock, leaving everyone
on separate sides till dawn.

The Rosemary

The rosemary you gave me,
clipped from the perennial
Dr. Seuss monster
that sprawled for years in your yard,
died in a glass on the windowsill.

The seeds you gave me
are still in their packets
going stale on the laundry-room counter.

Somehow I know God
is involved in all of this.
Just like he saved the day
at my cousin's little league game
delivering the ball
from the hands of seraphim
into the tiny glove of Freddy Jones.

I think God's idea of free will
is one of those invisible electric fences
like we use for our dogs.
Don't worry, he tells the Holy Ghost,
They'll learn their own limits.

It's sort of a do-as-you-please deal
as long as what you please pleases me.
Otherwise I'll flood the world
or torch your town with sulfur rain.

Would one man really have been enough?
Would Lot's wife laugh if we called
her the salt of the earth?

Would a speck of that salt
be enough, just this once
to revive the rosemary that died on the sill?
God I miss you.

The Time Traveler Explains His Trade

We often accept the world as mutable.
Love, once consistent as the tides,
swirls away in a breathless whirlpool,
or, more likely, drains like bathwater
recedes from the tub when the plug is pulled:
imperceptible at first, then gone in abrupt sputter.
We don't think twice, when pools
on the desert highway resolve to opaque asphalt,
firm as the wheels roll over it, no trace
of the tractor-trailer's shimmering reflection.
Nor do we wonder as heat from the grill
rills over the grates, rippling the tulips
distorting the rosebush.
We can't watch a bloom unfolding
or notice the change in a loved one's face
till it's made manifest discretely: an illusion
as foolish as a photo of a river.
Each body has its own imperfect metronome.
But I see every thing in all its stages:
the cherry tree, in blossom, barren,
fallen, in the fire, all at once, the sapling
and the crackling of the fire-eaten logs.
When a man extends his hand, it wavers,
blurs between an infant's balled fist
and an old man's twisted fingers.
I'm losing all distinction, as seeing
through the house fly's compound eye,
my vision occluded by a haze of ghosts.
People on the street are locust swarms,
and crows like volleyed arrows fill the sky.

Color Leaves the Curtains

Even when its branches
are still, the oak's trunk
is slowly swelling. Panes of glass
are flowing toward the sill.
Color leaves the curtains
and the weather makes its mark.
There's a change in your face
like the change in a river.
There's an even slower change
in your heart.

Letter to Hugo From Nederland, CO

Dear Dick: Here I am at 8,200 feet
in a town whose name means *lowland*.
I've got a headache like the green-black smudge
reflected snow leaves branded on the retina.
Is it too dramatic if I say I can see defeat?
I'm in a new café that's posing as a shack,
the corrugated steel siding rusted—artificially—
a failed attempt to simulate rustic.
Tables here are solid slabs of three-inch-thick pure pine
whose edges still recall the contours of the trunk,
but it's hard to imagine a logger or a sawyer
sitting down to eat in such a place.
I wash my face in the bathroom sink,
lather the three-day stubble with liquid hand soap,
drag the disposable Bic across neck and cheek.
Aside from this café, you'd love this town
buried under snow so deep you can picture a life
of feeding split pine to the woodstove,
curled up in the squalor of a drafty trailer,
the smoke clogging the chimney,
sending up a blue smear against the snow.
There must be an old enough bar up the street,
faded vinyl-topped tables, faux-wood worn
to smooth beige from plate after plate,
mismatched barstools mended with scrap metal
and saddle leather, rivet scratches etched into their seats,
windows filmed with grease from the fryer
and a few dead flies on the sill.
But, I'm here, near this river-rock fireplace
sipping a cup of jasmine tea, and typing on a laptop.
This is not your kind of suffering.
Dick, they've got a dead man on ice in a shed here.
An old Norwegian locked in a cryogenic freeze
waiting for the day we'll have the means for resurrection.
But I've seen the pine trees in the hard winters
split and fissure when the sap congeals.
And I've been told that to freeze a human body
ruptures each and every cell, water becomes crystal
and we literally explode with beauty.
Right now, it's almost evening,
I've finished my tea and paid my tab.
Out on the street, the low winter light
illuminates the windshield of the car that brought me.
It's time to go. I've got my keys. Best. Derek.

Letter to Hugo From Friday Harbor

Dear Dick: If my last letter was a freight train,
 words like boxcars across the page, this one
 will be closer to a swallow, stuck in the throat.
 This is about desire like a Montana fire: smoke clouds
 boiling up the ridge, sheets of flame in ravenous advance.
 If nothing else, I'm not afraid of emotion.
 Last night, on the highway, reflectors showed me the edge
 of the road. It's November. It gets dark early here.
 Down at 1,300 meters where the fuchsia jellyfish live,
 it's dark all the time, so no one sees their quiet smolder.
 In the water offshore, the plankton spin in currents, the kelp drag
 back and forth in the tide, and the transparent ciliates go on devouring:
 blobs consuming other blobs, amoebas, glass-celled diatoms.
 The baseboard heater ticks. I lie in my twin bed.
 The streetlight shuttles through the warp of blinds
 casting prison bar shadows across my face and pillow.
 You can still visit the old jail where they kept the usual murderers
 and thieves, the smugglers and rum-runners like Old Man Jameson
 who painted his boats green to hide from customs,
 or Lawrence Kelly who greased his hull with pot black and tallow
 for better speed across Haro Strait. Under the eaves
 there's a bald light bulb. It used to glow yellow
 when the jail had inmates. Then folks in town had something
 to talk about. Who was in? For what?
 But, Dick, aren't we all in? Isn't that what you'd tell us?
 How many times have you been under a yellow light,
 felt like you deserved a bunk under a barred window,
 been convinced your stubbled face framed in the square
 of jaundiced light from the cell door was your truest portrait.
 At least you never loved yourself too much.
 I've been foolish enough to think that being nice could hurt no one.
 If you go to the historical museum here
 you can see a millstone from the 1890's,
 a lichen-encrusted, stone doughnut, the size of a semi tire,
 worn smooth from so much crushing. Optimism, Dick,
 is a war of attrition against infidelities, flood waters, and flat tires.
 In the woods outside of town, there are fallen trees
 as thick as a man is tall. So love is tested.
 I'm sweating under the yellow light.
 I've seen the home team lose by a single point.
 The waves slap against the dock.
 The ferry churns a phosphorescent wake out of the harbor.
 The tides retreat to the Pacific, where, a mile below the surface,
 the blood-dark jellyfish plumb the blackness, pulsing like beating hearts.

A Simile

My thoughts of you are as crows on blacktop
huddled near a bread crust in the street.
At a truck's approach they scatter,
in awkward totter, and retreat
in the dissipating plume of exhaust.
But as if by magnet they re-congregate
on the road's surface by the crusted bread
as if they must persist in this fervent worship,
and at each truck's pass, their ritual repeat.

Mishap

Cut lilac cone
in a blue glass bottle.

Carrots washed clean
under cold clear water.

Ceramic plates stacked
on the black granite counter.

But the knife went errant
as I sliced the carrots,

so I bandaged up
my lilac flush.

Now the skin's dyed iodine-
brown around the cut.

When Held to the Window

fingernails and the clear plastic pen cap
share the same lit-from-within translucency
as this thin stratus sky. Outside,
an unfinished painting: every point—
holly leaf, roof pitch, pine needle—complete,
but the sky is blank, waiting for weather.
Ironic light washes all things toward white.
The height of illumination is the end of definition.
My shins on the coffee table reflect
this emptiness. Are they aspiring toward it? Or
is this an erasure from above. Misplaced agency
makes my skin and sky merge.
The various remotes on the table's still surface, float
like logs in an alpine lake. Why are they opaque:
embodying impermanence,
like face-down figures of the drowned?

Aubade

Red wine rings
on the counter this morning,
a sloppy astronomer's
circular orbits.
Last night there was
more than the world's
normal turning.
Today my thoughts
tumble, wet towels
in a dryer.

I clean the plates
and stack them neat,
in the drying rack
wet cutlery gleams,
but a violent kettle
on orange stove coils
sounds the shrill whine
of turbines:
your plane, departing.

SECTION 2

Justice in the Eaves

What promotes a pigeon to a dove?
One a problem, one an emblem.

It's a question of pigment
or lack thereof.
Is it pallor or power
we see in those wings?

Is it the words?
Dove a letter off from love
pigeon some cross
of pig and bludgeon.

Both avian denizens
of courthouse cornices
where inside,
men in black robes
with gray in their hair
decide what is white
what is blemished
what is fair.

Three Malapropisms

1. Writing

Obviously, writing is a huge foam of communication.
—From a freshman's paper

Yes! And to think I'd never noticed it before,
the nearly-porous, almost-weightless lace
of all this paper, and the froth of forest products
soaked in vats of bleach, or the frenzied fury
of the pen across the page. What else could result
from so thorough a stirring and churning of thought?
Thanks for sending out this little lifeboat of idea
on the storm-splashed surface of the form,
under the flag of what need not be said,
even if you lost an oar, or an R, in the foam.

2. Trying to Find a Needle on a Racetrack

Much better to look in a heap of grass,
languishing afternoon light, a fine
particulate of sweet alfalfa in the air,
a casual lifting of each stalk, a twisting of each
blade like a lock of hair as the pitchfork
moves like a comb. Then the broom across
the plinth, eyes straining for a glint.

Compare this with a whirl of blinding
colors, engines running, metal ramrods pumping,
bringing mass to bear, freighting all this weight
right at you, as you spread fingers on the asphalt,
fearful of the cobalt glare of grills that would
kill you like a deer, drawing near on the tarmac,
you'd want your old job back.

3. Leveraged to the Hills

*"You need to listen to your customer. Maybe he'll say,
'I need some help. I'm leveraged to the hills'."*

-A Wells Fargo Manager, at a sales meeting

What a predicament,
this debt to nature.
I kept wondering
if he meant leveraged
on the grandest scale:

I am leveraged
to the far blue mountains.

I am leveraged
over the river
and through the woods
where grandmother's house
is underwater. She's been
suckered just like her daughter.

Or perhaps he lacked the knowledge
of fencing, didn't get that it
was the hilt, not the hills.
No point in talking about the foible
and the forte. He's the kind of guy
that would misuse touché and he's
not the first to abuse a trope.

The trope has a hard row
to hoe. It's fallen out of flavor
and the taste is open
to extrapolation.

In all seriousness though,
this debt, this onerous burden
has an edge and a shadow.

We're all mortgaged to the earth
in these bodies we borrow.

Still Life Analysis

The motorcycle hit the tree,
but it was not damaged.
The tree that is,
aside from a few minor
scratches to the bark.
The motorcycle was a heap
of rumpled metal, folded together
like the navy blue curtains
in the house on the corner.
The rider having become a flyer,
missed the larger limbs,
but not the picket fence.
It was not damaged, but he
lay leaking dark oil at its base.

Beetle

The beetle flicked into the fire
first lost his legs and feelers.
They curled quick as singed hair

But there was no shriek like lobsters
boiling, no whistle issued
from heat-polished carapace.

The boys who flicked the beetle
in the fire were hoping for a pop
like a corn kernel rupture

or a crack to match the inner shudder
of pine logs splitting. But this beetle
left with less than a thud

a half-wet firework
fizzle, then dud.

Duwamish

The river is the color
of corrugated tin
loose on the roof
where the wind adjusts it
patched last year
and not yet rusted.

A Summer Afternoon

The magpies that sit on the split-rail fence
swoop in, one by one, and take the dog food,
kernel by kernel, in their sharp black beaks.

How they love to glide in their perfect arcs,
these crafty cosmopolitan crows,
an iridescent gleam on their sun-struck wings.

But near the bowl, in the barberry brush,
on patient haunches, waiting to leap,
with his predatory knack, lies the cat.

George's Corner

It's a soft bend along
the dirt road that runs
from the Snake River
up Wolf Creek through
the Flying U Ranch.

It's a nice, shaded spot,
the road bordered
by a ten or twelve-foot
rim of rock on one side,
the creek on the other.

It's the place where
my father and my
great-grandfather, George,
drank beer and ate the blackberries
that grow along the creek.

It's a place the Nez Perce
must have known
before we gave it a name,
before the army
forced them from their home.

It's a place of no name now.
Another bend along the creek
like many others.
We don't go there.
George is dead.

We sold the ranch to a billionaire
who now owns every rimrock,
gulch, and canyon,
every patch of thistle,
fencepost, gate, and legal access,

every dirt road, every blade of grass
down to the river,
where the current quietly
takes its leave,
refusing to be held.

Walking the Creekside Trail

I was startled by a dying cat
who raised up head and paws
from the low tangle of last year's weeds.
He was curled in the way of housecats
among the scattered rocks mid-path.
No doubt a former pet, he'd traded
the fireplace rug for this crabgrass and gravel.

So he lay there graceless,
his gray fur matted, his face, a gargoyle
fierce and pitiful, his eyes swollen shut
so that he batted at me
half-heartedly from his private darkness.

Not knowing what else to do,
I did what my father would later call cruel
and continued up the creek,
leaving him there amid the rocks and weeds.

The Cowboy Leaves the Bar

He emerges from the murk
and neon, drives out the ice-rutted
Main Street past the Conoco where houses break
to fields, the last traffic light flashing
yellow at that hour, muted in a whorl
of winter snow-mist, the air heavy
with thick flakes that peel from the sky.

The dirt lane is a smooth white, no tire tracks.
The fence posts, out of the white mire,
smudge in half-occluded headlights,
like old pilings rising through mist.
When he parks the car
the house is dark and silent.
He fumbles with the lock. The sky keeps falling
gently, gently on his hat and shoulders.

SECTION 3

Tell Me

Tell me, what did God know of fish?
To the scaled back a global flood was mercy
even bliss and who could know,
feet among the river stones,
of the rising brackish tide
the rain as distant as a desert dream.

And the aftermath, the corpses
strewn in sodden fields, bellies
bloated like kelp pods, chests
swollen like bagpipes in the sun,
as God's prism promise arcs across the sky
and Noah falls asleep to the drone of flies.

February 14th, 2013

What love can be found?

Elephant seals clambering on beaches
asserting their four thousand pounds of blubber,
swatting their flippers on wet sand
and uttering their kettledrum calls.

The alpha growls like an engine turning over,
the beta gargles back like a kitchen disposal.

Love's gone wrong in Pretoria.

The man who ran with blades for legs
shot his girlfriend through the bathroom door.
Though we'd marveled at his sleek extremities,
where it matters most, he's not machine, but man.
No carbon-fiber contours could hide from us
his bare-fleshed arms, the sweat at his temples,
or the pulsing veins on the back of his hand.

Cody Firearms Museum

Inside, you'll find Plexiglas displays
of historic firearms arranged
in various shapes:
a flower of rifle stocks
blooming like a firework,
or butt ends spread
like a peacock's tail.

Some trick of light or lacquer
makes polished stocks glare
like paddles lifted from water.

Look at the centerpiece where
guns, like turbine blades,
extend from a central hub.

What can one do
but admire the designer,
the steel and the ochre,
the stark rifle rotors?

The Stainless Steel Teapot

The stainless steel teapot
balloons and warps my features.
Holding my hand upright
my fingers stretch to claws,
turning it sideways,
they're fattened into paws.
When I smile I see
my transmogrified maw.

I'm graceful enough
as I pour the tea,
but how can I argue
with the animal I see?

Grapefruit

First the large kitchen knife,
the perfect steely severing
and piquant mist of citrus.
The two half moons wobble.
luminous, if impractical, wheels
lined with neatly-stenciled spokes.
Then surgical, the thin blade
of paring knife, cleaving from membrane
the glistening wedge of close-knit capsules.
Sugar first, followed by acerbic tang
brassy like a big-band intro.
Squeeze the rind for the last juice collected
in a pearl pool on the waiting spoon.

Ragtime

I focus on the next walnut
and the cold nutcracker in my hand.
Beside me a glass of seltzer hisses
as Zez Confrey clip-clops the ivories,
it's all lunge and strut
side-shuffle swagger
half honky-tonk, half carnival gimmick.
Saloon doors swingin' and loop-de-loop,
tilt-a-whirl and ten gallon hats.

I take a sip of my seltzer
that buzzes like a hot mic
and crack another walnut in my hand.

Assertions

The hot-wire fence will stop the cattle.

The earth is round, the coffee is just right,
so the truck will start. The salt will melt the ice
on the flagstones and the paper-bag handles
won't break. You won't shatter the chardonnay,
spill your potatoes, crack the marmalade.

The sky is blue. You can read Dostoyevsky
in the bathtub, but you can't make anyone
trust you. Death will look silly when it comes,
stooping by you and the scattered groceries.

You turn the key. The coffee burns your tongue.
The cows are through the fence. You're still so young.

The Time Traveler Describes His Vision

I've learned nothing if not the transitory nature
of the world, having in my mind twin memories
of both the sun's last gasp and its burst into being
held together like blue and red lenses
of old 3D glasses to make sense of the present
hydrogen sphere, warming my face as I sit here,
with you and your ghost, trying to explain.

On Blue

My mother asks if I believe in God
and I think of calving glaciers,
milk-blue streams,
and polished sea ice gleaming turquoise.
I try to find a shade of blue
between white and ultraviolet,
something off the spectrum
beyond the azure curl of opal-edged waves.
The rivers, lakes, and oceans fake it,
taking their blue from above,
smirking through their quiet undulations,
winking back the sun when wind abates.
And what of that hue
between heaven's apse
and the empty expanse of blackness?
There's not a color on earth to match it.

Beautifully, I Go

Beautifully, I go, in lines of pleasure,
lines of thought, out of the stripes
of bed sheets, along the floorboards,
onto the chessboard of tiles.

A right angle where the curtain meets
the porcelain. I refract the perfect arc
of parallel water jets, stunting their curve,
making a mess of them as soap

traces the contours of bicep, elbow,
hip, and thigh. I toss yesterday's
rumpled clothes into the hamper
and step into clean lines of corduroy.

Then it's down the sidewalk's
measured squares to the bus stop,
where the bus arrives
along electrified lines. When I get in
it begins down the asphalt canal
that leads to the city heart.

We wend through the grid,
brimming with people.

I know one of them is you.